

Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

Interdisciplinary Approaches
to a Neglected Topic

Edited by
Albrecht Classen



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Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture

Edited by
Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge

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Albrecht Classen
(University of Arizona, Tucson)

Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: Also an Introduction¹

In the foreword to his path-breaking collection of studies on the history of European mentality from antiquity to the present, Peter Dinzelbacher, defining some of the key elements of the history of mentality, lists as one of the most important aspects for this research area the relationship between young and old people, between the rule of the old and, hopefully, wise versus the rule of the young, often considered impetuous, inconsiderate, hasty, and lacking in wisdom. Other aspects representative of the history of mentality are, to touch upon a few more topics, the attitude toward sexuality, fears and hopes, the experience of joy, sorrow, and happiness, the evaluation and treatment of sickness, concepts of death and the afterlife, the significance of physical labor, concepts of violence, religiosity, cosmogony, space, time, and communication.² Since the publication of this most useful handbook, which covers all three major historical periods—antiquity, Middle Ages, the modern era—the history of mentality has experienced a considerable expansion, as reflected by numerous new studies which are concerned with issues such as anger, people's attitude toward the night, the relationship between adults and children, marriage, the family, and so forth.³

¹ I would like to recognize the helpful comments by Robert Levine and Juanita Feros Ruys, both contributors to this volume. I also greatly appreciate Karen K. Jambeck's careful and critical reading and her helpful suggestions.

² *Europäische Mentalitätsgeschichte: Hautthemen in Einzeldarstellungen*, ed. Peter Dinzelbacher. Kröners Taschenausgabe, 469 (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1993), X–XI.

³ Peter Dinzelbacher, *Angst im Mittelalter: Teufels-, Todes- und Gotteserfahrung: Mentalitätsgeschichte und Ikonographie* (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, and Zurich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1996); *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages*, ed. Barbara H. Rosenwein (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998); Tzotcho Boiadjev, *Die Nacht im Mittelalter*, trans. from Bulgarian to German by Barbara Müller (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2003); Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages*. Conjunctions of Religion &

Broadly speaking, the topic of old age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, however, though certainly dealt with by Klaus Arnold (Middle Ages) and Beatrix Bastl (modern era) in Dinzeltbacher's volume, even if only cursorily, has not yet attracted adequate attention. Arnold, for instance, discusses the various stages of life according to classical models from antiquity and established by Isidor of Sevilla and later further developed by Philip of Novare, and also explores generic ideals of youth and the desire to resist the aging process, whereas Bastl not only extends Arnold's outline by examining the attitudes toward old age since the sixteenth century, but also makes an attempt to differentiate between men's and women's experiences of old age.⁴ Most recently, Dinzeltbacher himself emphasizes that medieval people generally died very early, but the attitudes toward old age differed considerably, partly determined by great respect for the elder, partly by self-pity (Walther von der Vogelweide, Hugo Primas). In general, as we learn from *Europa im Hochmittelalter*, the proper preparation for death played a major role within the world of Christianity.⁵

The massive research project by Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby to explore the history of private life seems to have ignored old age as such, although the volume on the Middle Ages includes topics such as 'domestic society,' 'search for the father,' 'exile,' 'courtly love and jealousy,' 'accused women,' 'brothers,' 'women and marriage,' 'the couple alone,' 'women in the community,' 'heat and light in the house,' 'the active life and the contemplative life,' 'the body,' 'bathing and bleeding,' 'nudity,' 'the inner voice,' 'identity,' 'dreams,' etc.⁶ Ariès offered occasional comments on old age, but he mostly limited himself to highlighting the

Power in the Medieval Past (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003); Katarzyna Dybel, *Être heureux au moyen âge. D'après le roman arthurien en prose du xiii^e siècle*. Synthema, 2 (Louvain, Paris, Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2004); *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Results of a Paradigm Shift in the History of Mentality*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2005); Albrecht Classen, *Der Liebes- und Ehediskurs vom hohen Mittelalter bis zum frühen 17. Jahrhundert*. Volksliedstudien, 5 (Münster, New York, Munich, and Berlin: Waxmann, 2005). Surprisingly, the history of mentality has not yet met with much interest in the Anglophone world, but see Janet Kay Ryder, "Miracles and Mentality: The Medieval Experience," Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1993; Alan E. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell: Death and Retribution in the Ancient and Early Christian World* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993). See also Peter Dinzeltbacher, *Europa im Hochmittelalter: Eine Kultur- und Mentalitätsgeschichte*. Kultur und Mentalität (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2003); Johannes Grabmayer, *Europa im späten Mittelalter, 1250–1500: Eine Kultur- und Mentalitätsgeschichte*. Kultur und Mentalität (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2004).

⁴ "Lebensalter" (Arnold, "Mittelalter," 216–22; Bastl, "Neuzeit," 222–29).

⁵ Dinzeltbacher, *Europa im Hochmittelalter*, 139; id., *An der Schwelle zum Jenseits: Sterbevisionen im interkulturellen Vergleich* (Freiburg: Herder, 1989); Grabmayer, *Europa im späten Mittelalter*, 123–24, also offers only fleeting references.

⁶ *Revelations of the Medieval World*, ed. Georges Duby. *A History of Private Life*, II (1985; Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1988).

respect paid to old people throughout the Middle Ages until at least the end of the nineteenth century, whereas subsequently old age turned into a taboo.⁷ In fact, even for those who focus on the history of mentality in greater detail, the theme of 'old age' does not seem to be worth mentioning,⁸ although old people were as integral members of premodern societies as were young people.

Strangely, however, in his seminal and highly influential, perhaps too influential, monograph, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*, translated as *Centuries of Childhood*, Ariès had perpetuated the traditional, though rather naive, argument that "old age started early in the society of the past."⁹ Further, he emphasized that "Old France had little respect for old age: it was the age of retirement, books, churchgoing and rambling talk."¹⁰ And then he reveals his reasons for mentioning these claims regarding old people in premodern societies, a deep-seated fear of being relegated to a second-class citizen himself because of his old age: "But the fact is that this respect no longer has any object, for in our time, and this is the second stage, the old man has disappeared. He has been replaced by 'the elderly man' and by 'well-preserved ladies or gentlemen': a concept which is still middle-class, but which is tending to become popular."¹¹

Has the modern disregard of, or perhaps even discomfort with, old people in western societies led to a form of myopia in research as well? Has the current tendency to move old people into retirement communities or retirement homes, hence to make them disappear from our modern and post-modern life with its dominant focus on youth, also influenced research of cultural history and the history of mentality? This might well be, but the literary voice, humanity's consciousness, offers powerful correctives, whether we think of poetic works created in the Middle Ages, the age of the Enlightenment, or in the twentieth century.¹² In fact, we witness only since the late nineteenth century the rise of

⁷ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (1960; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), ; id., *Histoire des populations françaises et de leurs attitudes devant la vie depuis le XVIII^e siècle*, rev. ed. (1948; Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1971), 375–81.

⁸ Hans-Werner Goetz, *Moderne Mediävistik: Stand und Perspektiven der Mittelalterforschung* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 1999), does not mention 'old age' in his otherwise excellent *Forschungsbericht*.

⁹ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (1960; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), 30. For a comprehensive critique, see *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Results of a Paradigm Shift in the History of Mentality*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2005).

¹⁰ Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, 31.

¹¹ Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, 31–32; for modern perspectives on this problem, see Howard C. Eglit, *Elders on Trial: Age and Ageism in the American Legal System* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); *Encyclopedia of Ageism*, ed. Erdman Ballagh Palmore, Laurence G. Branch ; Diana K Harris (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2005); John Macnicol, *Age Discrimination: An Historical and Contemporary Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹² See the wonderful introduction by Laurel Porter, "Aging and Social Responsibility," *Aging in Literature*, ed. eadem and Laurence M. Porter (Troy, MI: International Book Publishers, 1984), 1–12;

significant, major literary works in which old protagonists assume center position (such as Theodor Fontane's *Der Stechlin*, 1899, or Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, 1952), whereas medieval and early modern literature hardly knows of larger narratives where the protagonists are in their old people, irrespective of many examples where the generational conflict plays a large role.¹³ The famous sociologist Karl Mannheim, strongly advocating youth over old age, argued that all cultural development is predicated on the change of generations:

Im Gegensatz zu unserer utopisch konstruierten Gesellschaft ist unsere generationsmäßig sich erneuernde in erster Reihe dadurch charakterisiert, daß Kulturschöpfung und -akkumulation nicht in denselben Individuen sich vollzieht, sondern stets 'neue Jahrgänge' einsetzen. Das bedeutet zunächst, daß Kultur fortgebildet wird von Menschen, die einen "neuen Zugang" zum akkumulierten Kulturgut haben"¹⁴

In contrast to our concept of a utopian society the present one is characterized in the first place by the fact the creation of new culture and culture accumulation are not carried out by the same individuals, but always by new generations. This means at first that culture continues to thrive through people who have a "new access" to accumulated objects of culture.

In a utopian society ideal people would know everything and would never need new knowledge, which would make the generational difference a moot issue. Old age Mannheim defined as follows:

Daß die Alten erfahrener sind als die Jungen, ist in Vielem ein Vorteil. Daß die Jugend weitgehend ohne Erfahrung ist, bedeutet für diese eine Minderung des Ballastes, eine Erleichterung des Weiterlebens. Alt ist man primär dadurch, daß man in einem spezifischen, selbsterworbenen, präformierenden Erfahrungszusammenhang lebt, wodurch jede neue mögliche Erfahrung ihre Gestalt und ihren Ort bis zu einem gewissen Grade im vorhinein zugeteilt erhält, wogegen im neuen Leben die formierenden Kräfte sich erst bilden und die Grundintentionen die prägende Gewalt neuer Situationen noch in sich zu verarbeiten vermögen"¹⁵

especially 2–4. I have also profited immensely from the sweeping reflections by Jon Hendricks and Cynthia A. Leedham, "Making Sense: Interpreting Historical and Cross-Cultural Literature on Aging," *Perceptions of Aging in Literature: A Cross-Cultural Study*, ed. Prisca von Dorotka Bagnell and Patricia Spencer Soper. Contributions to the Study of Aging, 11 (New York, Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 1989), 1–16.

¹³ Daniel Schäfer, "Alter," *Literatur und Medizin: Ein Lexikon*, ed. Bettina von Jagow and Florian Steger (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), coll. 38–43; here 41.

¹⁴ Karl Mannheim, "Das Problem der Generationen," id., *Wissenssoziologie: Auswahl aus dem Werk*, introd. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (Berlin and New York: Luchterhand, 1964), 530 (orig. published in *Kölner Vierteljahresshefte für Soziologie* 7 [1928], 2: 157–85, and 3: 309–30).

¹⁵ Mannheim, "Das Problem der Generationen," 534.

Insofar as the old people are more experienced than the young they have an advantage. Insofar as the youth is mostly lacking experience means for them a lessening of the weight, an alleviation for the continuation of living. Old age is primarily determined by a specific, self-acquired context of experience that shapes everything in advance. This means that every new and possible experience is assigned its shape and location to some extent in advance. By contrast, the formative forces in young life constitute themselves anew and have the power to incorporate the fundamental intentions of form-shaping forces resulting from new situations.

This approach, however, pertains to questions such as to how society progresses and how the young generation is related to the old, and does not offer a historical valuation of old versus young.

Fortunately, in the last decade or so a handful of scholars have slowly turned their attention to the topic of old age; however it still remains a major desideratum which this volume tries to address without claiming to stake out an entirely new field and covering every aspect from all possible angles. After all, old age, like any other stage in human life, affects every person differently, whether we consider the gender differences, the physical conditions, the cultural framework for each individual, the religious and social make-up of a society, geographic and climatic conditions, the impact of nutrition, social classes, religious and ethical value systems, technology, sciences, and many other factors. Accordingly, old age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance could be studied from a socio-historical, gender-specific, economic, art-historical, or literary-historical perspective. Moreover, medical and nutritional angles would be equally important as questions concerning clothing, housing, financing, and feeding as old people.

The reason, however, why we would turn to the issue of 'old age' would simply be the need to learn about ways in which medieval and early modern society approaches this issue in comparison with our modern approaches. Old people in premodern societies would not be of interest by themselves, if their appearance in the relevant documents and sources would not shed important light on society at large. At the risk of preaching to the converted, our interest in cultural-historical aspects is normally conditioned by the need to have contrastive, or parallel, images and to grasp how things were done in the past in comparison with today.¹⁶

¹⁶ For modern approaches to this topic, see *The Politics of Old Age in Europe*, ed. Alan Walker and Gerhard Naegele. Rethinking Ageing Series (Bunckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999); for medieval perspectives, see, among others, Raquel Homet, *Los viejos y la vejez en la edad media: Sociedad e imaginario* (Rosario, Argentina: Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina, 1997), who at first pursues a strictly historical, i.e., chronological approach, studying the various approaches to old age taken by the Visigoths and people in the high and late Middle Ages. Subsequently, Homet examines the reflections of old age in written sources, from the Biblical

Thus the past, hence also old age as it was treated and regarded then, serves as a laboratory for future developments, especially since modern sociology and gerontology, have gained tremendously in significance because the proportion of old people in western societies is growing tremendously, which also means a constant learning process both on the part of the older and of the younger generation.

Of course, the theme of 'old age' regularly stood in the center of various, sometimes even conflicting concepts and traditions, and our evaluation of medieval and early modern concepts of old people and their social, ethical, religious, and political function, depends very much on the philosophical, medical, and literary tradition. The manuscript tradition of Cicero's treatise on old age, his *De senectute*, in the ninth and tenth centuries indicates how much medieval intellectuals concerned themselves with this topic as part of the learned discourse inherited from classical antiquity.¹⁷ As Raquel Homet concludes,

En síntesis, desde el siglo XIII reapareció en la literatura la reflexión sobre la vejez, recuperando teorías filosóficas y médicas antiguas. Con esta visión coexistió la vieja imaginaria bíblica del anciano-santo, enriquecida con la grecorromana del viejo-sabio-vidente. Por último, en el siglo XV, la acuciante ansiedad por vivir contribuyó a alimentar una nueva o renovada reflexión sobre la ancianidad, no exenta de angustia.

In conclusion, since the thirteenth century the reflection upon old age reappeared in literature, retrieving philosophical and medical theories from antiquity. This vision existed side by side with the Biblical imaginary of the saintly elder, enriched with the Greco-Roman concept of the old sage and visionary. Finally, in the fifteenth century the burning anxiety to live contributed to the fostering of a new or renewed reflection upon old age, not exempt from fear.

The difficulties in coming to terms with all these problems can be easily grasped when we leaf through the proceedings of a conference held at the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of Toronto in February and November 1983, one of the earliest scholarly efforts to come to terms with this complex, both historically and topically relevant issue.¹⁸ The large number of papers are divided into the two following groups, the first group focusing on "Understanding of the

account to ecclesiastic writers, and secular poets (*Libro de Alexandre*, *Libro de Buen Amor* by Juan Ruiz, etc.).

¹⁷ B. C. Barker-Benfield, "A Ninth-Century Manuscript from Fleury: Cato de senectute cum Macrobio," *Medieval Learning and Literature: Essays presented to Richard William Hunt*, ed. J. J. G. Alexander and M. T. Gibson (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1976), 145–65; J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 1, 7, et passim.

¹⁸ *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe: Selected Papers from the Annual Conference of the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, held 25–26 February and 11–12 November 1983*, ed. Michael M. Sheehan, CSB. *Papers in Mediaeval Studies*, 11 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990).

Aging Process and Attitudes to the Aged," whereas the second examines the elderly in terms of their numbers, activity, and support. To give a few examples that underscore the enormous breadth of possible and/or necessary approaches, let us quickly review some of the major contributions. Luke Demaitre, for instance, investigates the use of medicine for the care of old people in the Middle Ages, and discusses such treatises as Roger Bacon's *On the Delay of the Consequences of Old Ages* and *On the Preservation of Youth*.¹⁹ Michael A. Signer probes how old people were treated in medieval European Jewish communities, whereas John T. Wortley looks into the phenomenon of the Desert Fathers and their surprisingly old age. Paul Edward Dutton reviews the political problems which aged Carolingian rulers faced as military leaders, and especially when they were challenged by their sons. Many medieval narratives include elderly figures, such as in Langland's *Piers the Plowman*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Morgan Le Fay), Chaucer's *Wife of Bath Tale*, his *The Reeve's Prologue*, and *The Pardoner's Tale*, and *The Parlement of the Three Ages*, as Alicia K. Nitecki illustrates.

We still do not know exactly the statistical proportions of old people in medieval society, as Josiah C. Russell argues in his paper, though we begin to have more reliable data and can approach the topic with more precision than before. David Herlihy presents an interesting case study of the community in Florence regarding the correlation between old age and destitution. Although one might assume that old people would regularly be well off and enjoy a pleasant end of life, the opposite often proves to be the case because the younger generations tended to claim most wealth for themselves to the detriment of the old parents and relatives. But the situation of widows tended to be different, especially after they had lost the second or even third husband, as Margaret Wade Labarge demonstrates.²⁰ Joel

¹⁹ For a late-medieval English version of Bacon's text, *De retardatione accidentium senectutis*, see the edition of the codex written by the well-known Hammond scribe in *Sex, Aging, & Death in a Medieval Medical Compendium: Trinity College Cambridge MS R.14.52*, ed. M. Teresa Tavormina. 2 Vols. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 292 (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006).

²⁰ Margaret Wade Labarge, *A Small Sound of the Trumpet: Women in Medieval Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 21–29; as for widows in the Middle Ages, see *Upon My Husband's Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe*, ed. Louise Mirrer. Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Civilization (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992); *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Sue Sheridan Walker. Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Civilization (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993); *Medieval London Widows: 1300–1500*, ed. Caroline M. Barron and Anne F. Sutton (London and Rio Grande: The Hambledon Press, 1994); *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl. The New Middle Ages (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner. Women and Men in History (New York: Pearson, 1999); Albrecht Classen, "Witwen in der Literatur des deutschen Mittelalters: Neue Perspektiven auf ein vernachlässigtes Thema," *Etudes Germaniques* 57, 2 (2002): 197–232.; id., "Widows: Their Social and Religious Functions According to Medieval German Literature, with Special Emphasis on Erhart

T. Rosenthal, studying the possibility of retirement of old people in fifteenth-century England, makes the most pertinent comment:

To the medieval self consciousness childhood, adolescence, and even old age were all familiar entities. All were recognized as occupying distinct segments of the life line. They were different from each other, and different from full adulthood. Each had its own dominion, characteristics, and attributes. And for those who managed to survive to become the elderly, the “elde” of poetic discourse, there was even the possibility of retirement. Yes, retirement in the fifteenth century.²¹

More important, however, Rosenthal also observes a curious self-defeating attitude permeating medieval society in which the dread of old age set in very early, even when people were still in good physical and mental shape and had excellent prospects of enjoying several additional decades of life, considering the old age of their parents and grandparents. In his most elegant style, Rosenthal poignantly summarizes this phenomenon:

Cultural dissonance took many forms. One was manifested in the self-dramatizing tendency to emphasize the early approach of old age. Many saw its frosty touch by age 30 or 35, few argued to postpone it until 50 or much beyond. This view, from the wrong end of the telescope, was a commonplace through Europe, and it made individuals prone to adapt their self-perception to fit the external, literary scheme. We have before us a clear case of a cultural model shaping identity, of art telling nature how to define itself.²²

In an interesting twist to the same issue, Elaine Clark examines the financial strategies to secure this kind of retirement or at least to make sure that one commanded sufficient funds even late in life, as dramatically illustrated by court documents drafted and signed by peasants and their sons regarding their property rights and inheritance plans.²³

Gross's *Witwenbuch* (1446),” *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 28 (2003): 65–79. See also Doreen Fischer, *Witwe als weiblicher Lebensentwurf in deutschen Texten des 13. bis 16. Jahrhunderts*. Europäische Hochschulschriften. Reihe I: Deutsche Sprache und Literatur, 1820 (Frankfurt a. M., Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 2002).

²¹ Joel T. Rosenthal, “Retirement and the Life Cycle in 15th-Century England,” *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, 173–88; here 173–74.

²² Rosenthal, “Retirement and the Life Cycle,” 185.

²³ Elaine Clark, “The Quest for Security in Medieval England,” *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, 189–200. She reaches the remarkable conclusion: “All of this is to suggest that the elderly left little to change when property was at issue. Whether they had cash on hand or not, all pensioners meant to offset economic uncertainty in the future. To this end they wanted the assurance of knowing that, even if a caretaker predeceased them, support would be forthcoming. . . . Simply put, a caretaker held land on condition that he, his children, and the heirs maintain or arrange for the maintenance of the old. In this way pensioners encumbered land with a personal obligation but, at the same time, afforded caretakers the prospect of someday inheriting land” (197).

In his afterword, Michael M. Sheehan emphasizes how much medieval society was keenly aware of old age as a separate and not necessarily easy stage in life: "in a development that was the reverse of the experience of Western society during the past generation, senescence was approached as a scientific question before it was identified as a social problem or as a subject of analysis by the social scientists. It is important, however, not to overstress the abstract quality of medieval gerontology."²⁴

But all of these contributions only touch upon highly specialized aspects of old age as perceived by the plethora of critical voices throughout the entire age, and it might indeed be the task of a Sisyphus to come to terms with the question of how old people were treated, regarded, talked about, depicted, feared, and loved. The same problem, though from a literary-historical perspective, emerges in the proceedings based on a conference organized at the Université de Provence in Aix-en-Provence in February of 1986. Here the contributors touch upon a wide range of literary texts, philosophical treatises, medical tracts, and legal documents, but in most cases they do not fully address the issue at hand and offer only fleeting observations.²⁵ Nevertheless Shulamith Shahar attempted to do justice to the larger issue of old age when she published her monograph *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, first in Hebrew (1995), then in English translation (1997).²⁶ However, she begins *in media res* and does not engage in a critical discussion with previous scholarship, of which, granted, there is not much. First, Shahar discusses who was considered to be old in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, at least according to standard models that go back to late antiquity, and which J. A. Burrow, among many others, has already examined in great detail,²⁷ whether we think of Adolf Hofmeister (1926), J. de Ghellinck (1948), or Elizabeth Sears (1986).²⁸

²⁴ Michael M. Sheehan, "Afterword," *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, 201–207; here 202.

²⁵ *Vieillesse et vieillissement au moyen âge*. Senefiance, 19 (Aix-en-Provence: Publications du C.U.E.R.M.A., 1987).

²⁶ Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: 'Winter clothes us in shadow and pain'*, trans. Yael Lotan (1995; London: Routledge, 1997); for a highly condensed and shortened version, see her article "The Middle Ages and Renaissance," *The Long History of Old Age*, ed. Pat Thane (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 71–111.

²⁷ J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 1986.

²⁸ Adolf Hofmeister, "Puer, Iuvenis, Senex. Zum Verständnis der mittelalterlichen Altersbezeichnungen," *Papsttum und Kaisertum: Forschungen zur politischen Geschichte und Geisteskultur des Mittelalters*. Paul Kehr zum 65. Geburtstag dargebracht, ed. Albert Brackmann (Munich: Verlag der Münchener Drucke, 1926), 287–316; J. de Ghellinck, "Iuventus, Gravitas, Senectus," *Studia mediaevalia in honorem admodum reverendi patris Raymundi Josephi Martin* (Bruges: De Tempel, 1984), 39–59; Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). For a summary, see Michael E. Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age: The Human Life Cycle in Medieval Thought, 1250–1350* (Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1989), 2–4.

Next, Shahar reviews the various opinions about the aging body, as voiced by numerous medieval writers and poets, such as Roger Bacon (1214–1292), Charles d'Orléans (1394–1465), Margery Kempe (ca. 1372–ca. 1439). On the one hand, there was a true conflict between youth and old age, whether in terms of claims on power or in terms of the spiritual opportunities which old age granted because of the fading away of the lustfulness of the flesh and hence the chance to gain atonement for one's youthful sins. Following, Shahar examines the various approaches taken to prolong life and to transcend the limitations of the aging body, both in vernacular literature and in scientific texts, reflected both in art work and in hagiographical literature.

For medieval people, but probably also for those in subsequent centuries, if not even until today, the question of how to handle approaching death loomed large on the horizon, especially the demands of the Church to confess one's sins, to atone for them, and to achieve absolution. The ideal was to die a 'good death,' both in the arms of the Church and surrounded by one's friends and family.²⁹ At the same time, there were many concerns regarding the normative behavior of old people, especially with regard to sexuality, as the numerous comments on the marriage of an old man with a young woman—only occasionally the opposite was the case—illustrate.³⁰ In her next chapter, Shahar turns to the religious-ethical teachings so often preached throughout the entire Christian era to honor one's parents, which was of great concern for many clerics and didactic writers, obviously because old people were not well cared for by their children. As Shahar comments, "Medieval culture was as aware of the discrepancy between the love and devotion of parents to their children and vice versa, as were later periods. (Perhaps that was why they expatiated so much on the duty of offspring to their parents.) The facts were stated ruefully, but with an acceptance of the nature of the human condition."³¹

In the subsequent chapters Shahar discusses the manifestation of old age among various social classes, such as churchmen, rulers and soldiers, urban dwellers, peasants, and concludes her study with an investigation of charitable organizations that existed in the Middle Ages. Indeed, this already proves to be highly useful in our approach to the mental-historical evaluation of old age in the

²⁹ There are many studies on death and dying in the Middle Ages and beyond, see, for instance, *Death in Towns: Urban Responses to the Dying and the Dead, 100–1600*, ed. Steven Bassett (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1992); *Tod im Mittelalter*, ed. Arno Borst, Gerhart von Graevenitz, Alexander Patschovsky, and Karlheinz Stierle (Constance: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 1993); D. L. D'Avray, *Death and the Prince: Memorial Preaching Before 1350* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994); Colin Platt, *King Death: The Black Death and Its Aftermath in Late-Medieval England* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

³⁰ Shahar, *Growing Old*, 78–82.

³¹ Shahar, *Growing Old*, 92.

past. But much work still remains to be done, particularly in the area of art history, music, literature, economics, and the reflections on old age in numerous other types of documents reflecting the wide range of human activities, struggles, investigations, and creations. We need to come to terms with how people thought about old age, how they approached the phenomenon by itself, and whether they accepted it as a natural progression or rejected it as a frightening last stage in life. The more we learn about the treatment of old age in the past, particularly about the discourse that surrounds it, the more will we gain a better foothold in our examination of old age today and in the future.

Some interesting avenues in this direction have been pursued by the contributors to the volume *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500*, edited by Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane, who seriously question many of the rather mythical perceptions of old age:

Few historical commonplaces are as resilient and persistent as those that address the subject of ageing and the nature of old age. For example, the notion that older people, in a not too distant past, received more respect from the young than they do at present is expressed as forcefully and repeatedly now as it was in 1500, and even earlier. Another 'truth' that has only recently been investigated is the belief that, once again in the not too distant past, older people, but particularly older women, lived out their final years in the homes of their adult children. Failing that, old women were believed to live alone, at the margins of society and on the edge of existence.³²

They alert us, in particular, to the numerous problems which scholarship on aging has faced since its early inception, perhaps twenty to thirty years ago, such as the myth that old women went through the same experience as old men, that old people in general were characterized by physical and mental feebleness, and that old people spent the last years of their lives in the bosom of their family, being taken care of comfortably by their grown-up children. A romantic notion of the old folks who snuggle in the warmth of their own corner in the kitchen, or in the backroom of the house where they are visited by their grandchildren and whom they tell cute fairy tales, or share with them their past experiences, are the stuff of the Grimm fairy tales, but not of the social-economic, political and religious history of the past, and certainly not the stuff of the history of mentality. Botelho and Thane correctly remind us that the scholarship on aging "has had to deconstruct the popular notion that old age was a phase of life characterised only by helplessness and senility. Similarly, it has had to debunk such notions as that religion was nothing more than a salve for aged souls or that old age always led to poverty. It has struggled to overturn the conception that an old age spent in the household of adult children, without independence or authority, was an ideal to

³² *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500*, ed. Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane. *Women and Men in History* (Harlow, London, New York, et al.: Pearson Education, 2001), 1.

be aspired to and a regrettably lost reality.”³³ Examining old age, as reflected in a wide variety of medieval and Renaissance sources, we can easily recognize the constructive nature of old age.

Much depends on how we identify old age, according to what criteria, and according to what functions. Claire S. Schen differentiates between ‘functional old age,’ which implies a decline in physical abilities and overall health; ‘chronological age,’ which simply reflects the actual age in years, often recorded by chroniclers and parish officials, among others, who, however, did not necessarily tell us what this old age meant for the individual; and general old age in family terms, denoting the oldest generation within a multi-generational context.³⁴ A third category, though much less defined, might be ‘cultural age,’ a stage in life where various variables come into play determining the role and function of an old person within his/her community. Accordingly, it would be entirely inappropriate to speak of ‘old age’ as a historical category by which we would hope to grasp the life and experiences of and roles played by old people at a specific point in time, as Joel T. Rosenthal and also Haim Hazan have argued.³⁵

Indeed, old age means nothing if judged by a simple chronological perspective, or by people’s self-estimation. Someone who had lost a spouse and children, or who suffered from a terminal disease, or someone who faced serious economic and political problems and felt pushed aside by the next generation, could easily claim to be old, whether at the age of thirty or of fifty. Almost everything depends on the social context, the particular role played by an individual, the attitudes expressed toward the old person by the younger generation, and the resources available for the old. The experiences of an old peasant in good health and still in control of his lands would have been entirely different from those of an old landless farmhand. An old and mighty queen had certainly a different outlook on life than a crippled, sick, and destitute urban woman. Old nuns and abbesses, for instance, found themselves in much better social, spiritual, cultural, and also medical conditions than old lay women. An old man who was cared for by his wife was in an admirable position compared to an old widowed and solitary man.

Another aspect also needs to be considered, which is well illustrated in an early-sixteenth-century text only recently made available in a modern edition. The Low-German chronicler Göbel of Cologne (d. 1543), member of the Augustinian convent of canons in Böddeken and a most important negotiator, diplomat, and economic advisor for his convent, once reports of a life-threatening experience

³³ *Women and Ageing*, 3.

³⁴ Claire S. Schen, “Strategies of Poor Aged Women and Widows in Sixteenth-Century London,” *Women and Ageing*, 13–30; here 14–17.

³⁵ Joel T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England*. Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 2, 6, 175; Haim Hazan, *Old Age: Constructions and Deconstructions* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 53.

during the return from a business trip to Lübeck (1509), which made his hair turn all grey, although he still felt very young: "Ick satte gra hare, wol dat ick noch jonck was, want et galt uns den halss. Hetten de knechte gewist, dat wy dat gelt hetten by uns gehat, se hetten uns gedodet unde hetten dat gelt genomen" (I got grey hair, although I was still young, because our life was threatened. If the soldiers had known that we had money with us, they would have killed us and would have taken the money).³⁶ Appearance and actual physical and mental conditions do not, as Göbel implies with his example, necessarily coincide, neither in the early sixteenth century nor today.

Medieval and early modern societies were not entirely different from ours, and old people were as much a presence in their world as today; however, we do not yet fully understand how the younger generation responded to and treated old people, and how and whether these old people claimed a stake in the public and private arena, maintaining control to some extent through monetary, fiscal, political, and legal measures, or through their authority as figures of tradition, wisdom, and knowledge. As Joel T. Rosenthal now confirms, "the actual presence of aged men and women was encountered at virtually all social levels and in all social settings. The response of their world to their existence and their role ranged from contempt and impatience to charity, retirement provisions and pensions, veneration and respect, and sometimes even an acceptance that the turnover of power in patriarchal society was a measured march whereby generation eventually succeeded generation."³⁷

However, as Rosenthal would be the first to admit, such generalities do not help us very much in gaining deeper insight into how old people were actually treated, and whether we would even be entitled to comment on 'old age' in such a sweep for all of Europe in a period of more than thousand years. Not surprisingly, he discusses, as most other scholars on aging have done, the stages of life (referring both to Cicero's *De senectute* and Innocent III's *De miseria humanae conditionis*), the phenomenon of longevity, which is extremely difficult to assess because of the uncertainty of our statistical data and the dominance of individual figures who achieved remarkable longevity,, and the coping with old age, as reflected in paintings and manuscript illustrations, such as in the *Lisle Psalter*, or commented on in the *Song of Roland*. Ultimately, however, Rosenthal's article offers us little more than a taste of the enormously broad topic of old age, obviously because most basic research has not yet been done, whether we turn to the history of

³⁶ *Die Chronik Bruder Göbels: Aufzeichnungen eines Laienbruders aus dem Kloster Böödeken 1502 bis 1543*, ed. Heinrich Rüthing. 2nd ed. Veröffentlichungen der Historischen Kommission für Westfalen, XLIV. Quellen und Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Religionsgeschichte, 7 (2005; Bielefeld: Verlag für Reginalgeschichte, 2006), 91.

³⁷ Joel T. Rosenthal, "Old Age," *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. William Chester Jordan. Supplement 1 (New York, Detroit, et al.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2004), 430–332; here 430.

literature or the history of art, whereas historians have forged a narrow path into the thicket and invite us to follow their lead.³⁸

Raquel Homet now offers a very sympathetic overview of old age from the early Middle Ages—focusing on the Visigoths—to the fifteenth century, combining historical perspectives with some literary examples, and adding insights drawn from the Biblical account and from ecclesiastic writers. Here we learn, though primarily through the lens directed toward the Iberian Peninsula, about the role of old people within their society, cared for either at home or in hospitals, their pensions and other retirement resources, and about old age as a stage in life ideal for fundamental reflections. Moreover, Homet also examines the testimony of some literary, ethical, religious, satirical, and biographical texts regarding the treatment of and attitude toward old people.³⁹

A similar approach to the topic of 'old age' can be discovered in Bernd-Ulrich Hergemöller's monograph *Die Kindlein spotten meiner schier* (2006),⁴⁰ though he emphasizes a rather curious interest in factual history ("faktographische Ebene," 5; facto-graphic level). A major focus of this study rests on the various models of the stages of life, as discussed throughout the Middle Ages. He also produces biographical facts concerning the life-spans of medieval rulers who died, on the average, at the age of 49 to 50 (30), and of their consorts, who tended to pass away on the average at the age of 40 (32). Moreover, the author illustrates the great

³⁸ See, for example, George R. Coffman, "Old Age from Horace to Chaucer: Some Literary Affinities and Adventures of an Idea," *Speculum* 9, 3 (1934): 249–77; Samuel Claggett Chew, *The Pilgrimage of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962); Philippa Tristram, *Figures of Life and Death in Medieval English Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 1976); Elaine Clark, "Some Aspects of Social Security in Medieval England," *Journal of Family History* 7 (1982): 307–20; Georges Minois, *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (1987; Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

³⁹ Homet, *Los viejos y la vejez*, 1997.

⁴⁰ Bernd-Ulrich Hergemöller, *Die Kindlein spotten meiner schier: Quellen und Reflexionen zu den Alten und zum Vergreisungsprozeß im Mittelalter*. Hergemöllers Historiographische Libelli, IV (Hamburg: HHL-Verlag, 2006). Although he compiles much valuable information, he does not properly engage with the scholarly literature and tends to move quickly far beyond the Middle Ages in his search for useful data. Ultimately, Hergemöller pursues his topic primarily because of his concern with modern-day ageism and because he hopes to find its roots in the Middle Ages—a rather problematic approach; see my review, forthcoming in *Mediaevistik*. Pat Thane, "Old Age in English History," *Zur Kulturgeschichte des Alterns*, ed. Christoph Conrad and Hans-Joachim von Konratowitz (Berlin: Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen, 1993), 17–37; here 34, offers the most discriminating and far-reaching summary of her research: "There is no evidence of a significant decline over time in the degree to which 'old people' were valued in English society. Studies which assert that this is so generally fail to recognize the complexity of the category of 'old people', tend to stress literary sources lamenting the dotage of very old age . . . and to overlook the many descriptions of the active younger old, which vary little over time. It is also clear that in any age old people who retain power in any form (e.g. property) can ensure respect. In all periods there have been competing discourses about old age, which correspond to the variety of roles old people play in all societies."

influence of the concepts of old age as developed by Aristotle, Seneca, and Cicero on medieval mentality and literature (47–49), and then turns to two literary examples of grotesque and contemptuous descriptions of the aging body, similar in attitude, though far apart in time and cultural background, (*Ruodlieb*, Oswald von Wolkenstein; see 50–54). Then, however, Hergemöller resumes his primarily historical oriented discussion of old age, here introducing individual rulers who reached a remarkably old age, then of the possibilities for individual people to enter retirement, of how artists portrayed old age, and of didactic precepts for old people, of intra-generational conflicts, and of the contempt for old women (the old crone, here 115–18).

The author reaches two remarkable conclusions that will find many echoes in the contributions to the present volume. On the one hand, historical gerontology, or Old Age Studies, produce new hermeneutic lenses to study medieval and Renaissance people, irrespective of their social class, from a new perspective. On the other, Hergemöller strongly admonishes us to abstain from global, generalizing statements regarding old age: “Es wurde deutlich, daß sowohl die soziale Skalierung als auch die geschlechtsspezifische Risikobehaftung zu grundsätzlichen Abweichungen von einem arithmetischen Mittel führen” (119; we have realized that both the social differentiation and the gender-specific risk factors fundamentally deviate from the arithmetic mean). This implies for him that modern gerontologists likewise have to be extremely careful in the consideration of social backgrounds and financial conditions of old people (119). Altogether, however, Hergemöller whets our appetite more than he fills the plate, perhaps because the factographic approach, as he calls it, tends to simplify and dramatize the actual differences in mental-cultural attitudes toward old people. As the conclusion to his valuable study indicates, however, the author demonstrates interest in the topic of old age primarily because of the far-reaching consequences of ageism in modern societies, if not of an outspoken contempt and hatred of old people because their numbers are rising and their functionality for the economy is dropping. In fact, Hergemöller seems to have ventured into the history of old people in premodern times in the first place because of his concern with old people today and the urgent need to reintegrate them into our society (119–29).

Let us turn to some literary examples from various centuries, genres, and different authors, although Jon Hendricks and Cynthia A. Leedham have rightly warned us: “Perhaps, in using literature as a data base for looking at attitudes toward age and aging, we should strive not for objectivity in the sense of seeking ‘the truth’ or ‘the Greek view of aging, . . . but rather for an enlightened intersubjectivity that enables us to appreciate the richness, complexity, diversity, and ambivalence of attitudes

toward aging.”⁴¹ Margery Kempe, the late medieval English aspiring mystic (ca. 1373–1438), who provides us with astonishing details into her private life, also discusses her relationship with her old husband at a time when he had reached the stage of senility:

Then she took her husband home with her and looked after him for years afterwards, as long as he lived. She had very much trouble with him, for in his last days he turned childish and lacked reason, so that he could not go to a stool to relieve himself, or else he would not, but like a child discharged his excrement into his linen clothes as he sat there by the fire or at the table—wherever it was, he would spare no place. And therefore her labour was all the greater, in washing and wringing, and so were her expenses for keeping a fire going. All this hindered her a very great deal from her contemplation, so that many times she would have disliked her work, except that she thought to herself how she in her young days had had very many delectable thoughts, physical lust, and inordinate love for his body. And therefore she was glad to be punished by means of the same body, and took it much the more easily, and served him and helped him, she thought, as she would have done Christ himself.⁴²

Most Kempe scholars have considered this passage only in passing, as one of the many examples of Margery’s attempts to find innovative ways to join with Christ, being told by Him to take care of her human husband as a proxy, which is exactly what the writer expresses as well.⁴³ Apart from the spiritual dimension, however, here we have an excellent mirror of social reality because of the author’s concrete reference to her old husband’s infirmity and senility, her need to wash all the soiled linen, her serious complaints about this heavy and endless work, and yet also her positive attitude toward her husband. After all, her caring for him allowed her to continue with her service for Christ, albeit transferred to the domestic sphere.

The situation proves to be entirely different, however, when we turn to a much earlier example, the early ninth-century Old High German heroic ballad, the *Hildebrandslied*, only once copied into a liturgical manuscript by two scribes in the Benedictine monastery of Fulda.⁴⁴ Here the old father Hildebrand, who has spent thirty years in Hunnish exile, encounters his son Hadubrand, who has grown up by now and turned into a leader of an army as well. Tragically, however, they

⁴¹ Jon Hendricks and Cynthia A. Leedham, “Historical and Cross-Cultural Literature,” 4.

⁴² *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. B. A. Windeatt (London: Penguin, 1985), 221.

⁴³ Kathleen Ashley, “Historicizing Margery: *The Book of Margery Kempe* as Social Text,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28, 2 (1998): 371–88; here 381.

⁴⁴ *Althochdeutsche Literatur. Mit altniederdeutschen Textbeispielen. Auswahl mit Übertragungen und Kommentar*. 2nd revised and expanded ed. (1998; Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2004), 68–70. For a recent summary of research, leading to a communicative interpretation, see Albrecht Classen, *Verzweiflung und Hoffnung: Die Suche nach der kommunikativen Gemeinschaft in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters*. Beihefte zur Mediaevistik, 1 (Frankfurt a. M., Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 2002), 1–52.

have never seen each other before, and, even worse, the young man assumes, based on the testimony of some sailors ("seolidante," 42), that his father is dead. Everything he has heard about Hildebrand he had been told by the old members of his tribe whom he regards as experienced and hence as trustworthy: "alte anti frote, dea érhina warun" (16). By contrast, the old man, leader of an obviously entirely different tribe, if not of Hunnish soldiers, appears to him untrustworthy, especially when Hildebrand tries to strike friendship with him by handing him heavy golden rings as gifts. Hadubrand considers this gesture as a sign of betrayal, deception, and manipulation, rejects the gifts outright, and mocks the opponent as "alter Hun" (39; old Hun).

Considering the military situation and the conflict between the authority of the old tribesmen and the sailors on the one hand, and Hildebrand's own claims, there is little wonder that Hadubrand rejects the old man's claims of being his own father. The reports about the death of the almost mythical father somewhere in the East carry much more weight than the faulty communicative effort by the enemy leader facing him now in front of two armies. Consequently, both resort to their weapons, but we can only surmise what the outcome might have been: either the death of the son, being defeated by the highly experienced and probably much superior old hero, or the death of the father, succumbing to the strength and speed of the young opponent, or, most tragically, the death of both.⁴⁵

Old age here proves to be most complex, being regarded as wise, authoritative, and trustworthy, as far as Hadubrand's tribesmen and the sailors are concerned, whereas the old Hildebrand, being the military opponent who appears to utilize the reference to his old age and his role as Hadubrand's father only as a ploy, emerges as failing in communicating properly with his son, as a rough, militarily steeled man who has difficulties in coming to terms with his emotions and hides them behind the mask of a stout warrior, paying attention only to his honor, and rejecting all familial ties to his sons because the latter challenges him on the battlefield. But Hildebrand does not seem to be a weakling, worn down by the many years of life as leader of his army. When the struggle begins, the fragmentary text does not indicate whether either of the two warriors displays any shortcoming in their manly prowess, but we can be certain that Hildebrand, as the uncontested leader of his men—as far as we can tell—has enormous military experience and has survived, because of his fighting skills and his unfailing

⁴⁵ For the most recent introduction and critical analysis in English, see Brian Murdoch, "Heroic Verse," *Germanic Literature of the Early Middle Ages*, ed. id. The Camden House History of German Literature, 2 (Rochester, NY, and Woodbridge, Suffolk, Camden House, 2004), 121–39. For the most comprehensive and in-depth study published in recent years, see Wolfgang Haubrichs, *Von den Anfängen zum hohen Mittelalter*. Part 1: *Versuche volkssprachiger Schriftlichkeit im frühen Mittelalter (ca. 700–1050/60)*. Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von den Anfängen bis zum Beginn der Neuzeit, I (Frankfurt a. M.: Athenäum Verlag, 1988), 147–59.

physical strength, thirty years of warfare. It might be doubtful whether the young man has a real chance against him, but the ballad does not relate the outcome of their fighting to us.⁴⁶ At any rate, old age here proves to be the pinnacle of human life, not the end phase, as is the case also with the old man of the mountain in the Arthurian romance, *Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal* (early thirteenth century), which I will discuss in my contribution to this volume. However, in Hadubrand's eyes this old man appears as contemptible and treacherous, though he does not understand who he really is and whether his military claims can be believed. By the same token, his respect for the old people of his own tribe proves to be extensive, since they represent the highest authority for him.

Old age also proves to be the hallmark of boldness, experience, strength, and courage in the Old-English epic of *Beowulf* (dating proves to be more tantalizing today than ever, with suggestions ranging from ca. 680 to ca. 800), where only the old protagonist dares to face off with the dangerous dragon and eventually kills it with the help of young Wiglaf: "... he geheold teal / fiftig wintra — wæs ða frod cyning / eald eþelweard" (2208–10; He ruled it well / for fifty winters, grew old and wise / as warden of the land ...).⁴⁷ In a historical reflection, the poet also adds the following comments about the superior qualities of the hero who senses the approach of death and yet serenely ends his life by accepting his fate without any laments: "... Him wæs geomor sefa / wæfre ond wælfus, wyrd ungemete neah / se ðone gomelan gretan sceolde, / secean sawle hord, sundur gedælan / lif wið lice" (2419–23; He was sad at heart, unsettled yet ready, sensing his death. / His fate hovered near, unknowable but certain; it would soon claim his coffered soul, part life from limb ...).

We might not be too far off our target here if we cite a profound statement by Jean-Paul Sartre, which David G. Troyansky used as the motto for his monograph

⁴⁶ In the so-called *Jüngere Hildebrandslied*, first printed in 1472, everything has been turned into an almost humorous exchange between the old and the young warrior, with much more emphasis on the former's considerable age. However, here Hildebrand eventually defeats Hadubrand without killing him, mocking his youth which made him unfit to overcome the more experienced warrior (stanzas 13–15). At the end, they both play a game, pretending that the outcome between them was the very opposite, which at first pleases Hadubrand's mother considerably, until she finally learns that the prisoner is her own, long lost husband, which then leads to general celebrations. For a text edition, see *Das deutsche Mittelalter in seinen Dichtungen: Eine Anthologie vom frühen bis zum späten Mittelalter*, ausgewählt und übersetzt von Albrecht Classen. Mit einem Anhang zur Barockpoesie. 3rd rev. and expanded ed. (1994; Columbus: Greyden Press, 2000), 23–30; for a detailed discussion, see Albrecht Classen, "The *Jüngere Hildebrandslied* in Its Early Modern Printed Versions: A Contribution to Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Reception History," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 5, 3 (1996): 359–381.

⁴⁷ *Beowulf: an edition with relevant shorter texts*, ed. Bruce Mitchel and Fred C. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); *Beowulf: A Verse Translation. Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*. Trans. Seamus Heaney. Ed. Daniel Donoghue (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2002). Note: this translation, which is wonderful, is more a poetic than absolutely accurate translation.

on *Old Age in the Old Regime*: “the fact that I am old for others is to be profoundly old. Old age is for me a reality that others feel, they see me and say, ‘This nice old man,’ and they are kind because I will die soon, and afterwards they are respectful, etc.: *it is other people who are my old age*” (emphasis mine).⁴⁸ Indeed, Hildebrand is not old in his own terms, but he appears very old in Hadubrand’s eyes. By contrast, Beowulf knows that he is old, but he is resigned to it and even displays pride in his stage of life. Hence Hadubrand’s perception is not absolutely negative, instead the evaluation of old age depends on the circumstances and specific contexts presented by the individual poets, painters, sculptors, and other artists. In other words, it proves to be a rather amorphous and malleable category, either for the goodness or the evilness of life, as the case of the Old French *Chanson de Roland* can illustrate. After Roland has blown his horn to ask Charlemagne to return and avenge their death, his jealous father-in-law Ganelon tries to convince the ruler that he is too old to think of war and battle and should ignore Roland’s desperate call from the distance as a foolish act: “‘De bataille st nient! / Ja estes vus veiz e fluriz e blancs; / Par tels paroles vus reemblez enfant’ (1770–72; ‘There is no battle; / You are old, hoary and white-haired. / Such words make you seem like a child).⁴⁹

Consequently even the faintest attempt to compare the experience of old age in the *Hildebrandslied* or in the *Chanson de Roland* (ca. 1098–1000), for example, with the passage contained in Margery Kempe’s *Book*, cited above, would certainly fail because their worlds were entirely different, and so too the attitudes, ideas, concepts, and values, which includes the function of old age for the individuals and for their communities they lived in. Nevertheless, in all three texts, separated by centuries and languages, not to speak of their specific cultures, old age emerges as significant and important for the lives of everyone involved with old people. Old age evoked respect and contempt, ridicule and fear, sympathy and rejection.

A powerful example of an admirable old man and a respected old woman can be found in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s monumental epic romance, *Willehalm* (ca. 1218), closely modeled on the *chansons de geste*. The protagonist’s old parents, Heimrich of Narbonne and his wife Irmschart of Pavia, demonstrate throughout their extraordinary leadership roles and illustrate through their behavior and actions that old age has not slowed them down or diminished their mental and physical forces.

Whereas Heimrich joins his son Willehalm in the military campaign against the Saracen, leading his own men into battle, Irmschart secures sufficient monetary

⁴⁸ David G. Troyansky, *Old Age in the Old Regime: Image and Experience in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989).

⁴⁹ *La Chanson de Roland*. Ed. critique par Cesare Segre. Nouvelle édition revue. Traduction de l’italien par Madeleine Tyssens. Vol. 1 (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1989); *The Song of Roland*, trans. with an intro. and notes by Glyn Burgess (London: Penguin, 1990).

funds and other support to ensure Willehalm's success in the second and decisive, ultimately victorious battle against the Saracens. These besiege his castle at Orange in order to capture Giburc, formerly Arabel, the Saracen wife of Tibalt, but now married to Willehalm and converted to Christianity, as expressed by her new name. Irmschart indicates, on the one hand, her frustration regarding her old age and her inability as a woman to fight on the side of her husband against the enemies. On the other, she knows how to make all her resources available and thus to provide the essential means for the warfare against the hostile army:

'I shall render tribute in rich payment, even though I am not a vassal. What am I good for after all, old woman that I am?' said Irmschart of Pavia. 'I shall donate an army at my own expense, to go to Orange to help you, dear son. My wealth is untouched. Now much of it will be spent, and if anyone is prepared to accept gold and does not disdain it, I shall share with them for your sake, dear son, as many gold coins as eighteen water buffaloes can haul away. I shall not flee from you. I shall wear armour myself. I am a woman strong enough to bear arms at your side. The brave man, not the coward, will be able to see me with you. I shall strike blows with my swords.'⁵⁰

By the same token, Willehalm's old father had voiced his complete support and had indicated to his son how much he could rely on him under practically every circumstance: "I want to share your suffering, unless I am prevented from doing so by some great overburdening distress or by that compelling command which separates the soul from the body. It ill befits your noble manliness to harbour doubts about me and to demean our loyalty" (83). Interestingly, once old Heimrich has learned the whole truth of the tragic outcome of the first battle, he breaks out in tears and is almost out of his mind for utter grief, until his wife reminds him of his duties and obligations as a leader of his men:

Is this the way you show your bravery? You still have strong limbs. If you are going to weep like women or like a child crying for the least little thing, how does such wailing befit heroes? If you wish to live bravely, you must offer losses and gifts and help him who has come to us, whose losses we have all heard. We have suffered these

⁵⁰ Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Willehalm*, trans. Marion E. Gibbs and Sidney M. Johnson (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1984), 88. For most recent perspectives on these texts, see *Wolfram's "Willehalm."* *Fifteen Essays*, Martin H. Jones and Timothy McFarland (Rochester, NY, and Woodbridge: Camden House, 2002); see also my review in *German Studies Review* XXVI, 1 (2003): 137–38. None of the contributors, however, considers the phenomenon of 'old age' in *Willehalm*. Sylvia Stevens, *Family in Wolfram von Eschenbach's Willehalm: mīner māge trīwe ist mir wol kuont*. *Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature*, 18 (New York, Washington, D.C./Baltimore, et al.: Peter Lang, 1997), 61–83, discusses the various family relations, such as Louis and his deceased father Karl, Irmschart as Willehalm's mother, Gyburc and Heimrich, and Gyburc and Vivianz, but does not examine the fact of Irmschart's and Heimrich's old age. The reason might rest in the phenomenon that both figures do not display any real signs of old age and perform most energetically and decisively. Their old age appears only through bodily signs, but it does not seem to have affected their spirit and intellect.

losses with him. If all of you of Heimrich's lineage will honour his kinship, then Willehalm, my son, will be recompensed for what he has suffered. Whoever is deterred by cowardice would be better off dead" (84).

In all subsequent narrative events, however, Heimrich demonstrates his utmost political, military, and personal skills in leading his people, in paying respect wherever it might be due, and in soliciting help from all knights capable of raising arms against the Saracens. Nothing ever indicates his old age as a handicap; instead his extraordinary degree of experiences and skills make him to the natural leader of his people and as their spokesperson. This is best reflected in his speech addressed to Giburc during the council on the day before the decisive battle:

Heimrich's white beard was sprinkled with tears too, as he said: 'Your faithfulness and your womanliness, Madam, have taught us that our heartache will be turned to joy. You could have disgraced us, if you had not remained steadfast towards us. We would have been forced from our position of high honour, and if you had not stood by my son, this land would have been lost and Orange, the fortress, as well, that best of all towns, which has endured much punishment through assaults. But your loyalty directed you, and still does, to do that which demonstrates your renown" (129–30).

Heimrich sings a song of praise of his daughter-in-law, but we can also observe that this old man does not reveal any sign of old age and behaves just as Hildebrand would have, or any other hero in Old High German, Old English (*Beowulf*), Old French, or Middle High German literature.⁵¹ Once the actual battle has begun, for instance, we are informed: "Now old Heimrich was leading the second strong battalion" (165); or: "Then old Heimrich struck up a tune with swords for the jig which had often swirled around him. This was the inheritance which the old man had bequeathed to his sons The men from Ganfassasche are now in trouble in the face of the superior strength of Heimrich's company" (189); or: "Old Count Heimrich was so daring that he urged his young knights towards the pursuit of love" (190). Apparently, 'old' in the context of heroic poetry and the *chansons de geste* does not necessarily mean 'old' in physical and mental term; instead only 'old' in terms of years and the individual person's position within the older generation.⁵²

⁵¹ Surprisingly, there is practically no research on these two elderly figures in Wolfram's *Willehalm*; see, for instance, the commentary by Joachim Heinze in Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Willehalm*. Nach der Handschrift der Stiftsbibliothek St. Gallen. Mittelhochdeutscher Text, Übersetzung, Kommentar, ed. Joachim Heinze. Mit den Miniaturen aus der Wolfenbütteler Handschrift und einem Aufsatz von Peter und Dorothea Diemer. Bibliothek des Mittelalters, 9 (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1991). The search in the *Modern Language Bibliography* and other reference works yielded nothing.

⁵² Michael Mitterauer, "Problemfelder einer Sozialgeschichte des Alters," *Der alte Mensch in der Geschichte*, ed. Helmut Konrad (Vienna: Verlag für Gesellschaftskritik, 1982), 9–61; here 45, already observed: "Eine hohe Achtung alter Menschen kann auch dort gegeben sein, wo diese keine

Let us take a look at another example, once again removed in time, space, and language, yet equally representative of the diversity of perspectives regarding old age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In Christine de Pizan's (ca. 1364–ca. 1430) *Le livre du duc des vrais amans* (1403–1405),⁵³ an old lady raises her voice almost mid-point, strongly urging the female protagonist to abstain from her erotic affair, and from then on determines to a large extent, though mostly in the background as a moral and ethical authority, the remaining part of the romance.⁵⁴ This old lady, the Dame de la Tour, voices a severe warning against all extra-material affairs, and urges her young lady to stay away from all seduction attempts and to pursue the path of virtue:

so I beg you, in the name of all the love you have for me, that, once you have seen this letter that you are ready to come to me within a week from then; I will send for you with all due honor. Do not regret leaving your household in the slightest, for I promise, upon my faith, to reward your effort so handsomely that it will always be to your advantage and to that of your kin. (111)

But the Dame cannot comply with the lady's request to come to her and help her in this complicated situation because she has to take care of a very sick daughter. Everything else in her letter, however, is concerned with the lady's well-being within the social context, which requires us to read this letter in an indirect fashion, reflecting on the broad values taught by the old lady. She unhesitatingly deconstructs all her behavior that is directed toward entertainment and enjoyment, and urges her lady to leave all these investments behind.

Considering both the personal and the general-political situation, the Dame de la Tour encourages the lady to change her social approaches and to acknowledge how much she herself is subject of public scrutiny:

So you can see, dear Lady, that every great princess —and similarly, every woman— must be more than eager to acquire a good reputation than any other

Autorität mehr besitzen. Autorität wiederum muß nicht in allen Lebensbereichen in gleicher Weise ausgeübt werden" (Old people can enjoy high reputation even then when they no longer control authority. Authority, on the other hand, is not necessarily exercised in every area of life in the same manner). Heinrich, however, although an old man, still exerts authority and leads his men into battle.

⁵³ For a biographical overview reflecting also the latest research, see Albrecht Classen, "Christine de Pizan," *The Literary Encyclopedia* 25. Jan. 2006. Online publication. *The Literary Dictionary Company*. <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=871&PHPSESSID=85e86d197aeb033f1736046105b84947> (last accessed on Oct. 13, 2006).

⁵⁴ Christine de Pizan, *Le livre du duc des vrais amans*. A critical edition by Thelma S. Fenster. Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 124 (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1995). For the English translation, see Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the Duke of True Lovers*, trans., with an introduction, Thelma S. Fenster. With Lyric Poetry trans. Nadia Margolis (New York: Persea, 1991).

treasure, for it makes her shine with honor and it remains forever with her and her children (115).

She does not address her own situation specifically, but each piece of advice for the prince can be read in light of our investigation, which in a way concerns the intra-generational conflicts. More important, however, the Dame de la Tour warns of the legitimacy questions concerning the children born by the princess if she pursues an affair (114), and challenges her to abstain from the folly of youth: "I can well imagine and envisage the reasons propelling a young lady to incline herself toward such a love: youth, ease of situation, and leisure make her think, 'You are young, pleasure is all you need. You can well love without baseness'" (115–16). Clearly speaking from the position of old age, the Dame concedes, "I do not say that a noble young lady cannot amuse herself, laugh, and play in seemly fashion at the right time and place, even where there may be lords and gentlemen, nor that she must not honor foreign visitors as befits her high station, each according to his rank. But this must be done so soberly and with such fine deportment that there is not a single glance, nor a laugh, not a word that is not carefully weighed and governed by reason" (117–18).

There can be, however, no constructive conclusion to the love affair, whereas the Dame and the Princess reach an intimate understanding that this affair could cause serious conflicts and should be ended, or at least kept absolutely secret. Irrespective of the further development, we can observe how much Christine de Pizan has predicated the entire exchange on the understanding that the Dame represents the older generation, whereas the Princess belongs to the younger generation. But neither the Dame nor the Princess gains absolute authority, though the logical reasons by the former are quite convincing. However, love cannot be ruled by reason alone, and old age is not authority enough to determine whether an erotic relationship can be approved or not. The lovers continue to see each other, though under much more rigid control, and essentially disregard the Dame's recommendations because they love each other irrespective of the social pressure.⁵⁵

Yet tragically, problems mount, mostly due to scandalmongers, which prevent the lovers from seeing each other, indirectly confirming that the old Dame had been correct: "But I saw her receive dishonor because of me, since everyone was whispering about the situation for which I came to despise my long life" (131).

⁵⁵ Xiangyun Zhang, "Du miroir des princes au miroir des princesses: Rapport intertextuel entre deux livres de Christine de Pizan," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 22 (1996): 55–67; Carol E. Harding, "'True Lovers': Love and Irony in Murasaki Shikibu and Christine de Pizan," *Crossing the Bridge: Comparative Essays on Medieval European and Heian Japanese Women Writers*, ed. Barbara Stevenson and Cynthia Ho. The New Middle Ages (New York and Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2000), 153–73.

This does not necessarily legitimize the old lady's teaching, but it certainly suggests that young people ought to pay attention to the advice given to them by elders who have, as we may assume, their best interest in mind: "Thus I would like you to be near me; I would tell you about some very charming things, which I am not putting into writing to you, for good reason. I need your help and advice, and so I beg you, in the name of all the love you have for me, that, once you have seen this letter, you put your affairs in order as quickly as you can, such that you are ready to come to me within a week from then; I will send for you with all due honor" (111).

Certainly, Christine does not discuss old age per se when she introduced this Dame as the female counselor to the young protagonist, but she definitely submits to her audience that young people would have much to learn from older people and need them actually desperately in all these delicate measures concerning their emotional, personal affairs. Old age, in other words, at least as described by this poet, proves to be instrumental in giving advice and suggesting directions to be taken by young people.

Depending on the context, however, old women could assume the very opposite function, as powerfully illustrated by the old go-between in Juan Ruiz's *Libro de buen amor* (ca. 1340–1360), a classical figure of love literature where a young man needs help in securing the love of a lady he has been pursuing in vain, as he is left without further strategies to achieve his goal.⁵⁶ Here, this go-between, Trotaconventos (738, 1), is characterized as follows: "I found an old woman of the kind I needed, / cunning and skilful and very knowledgeable. / Venus could not have done more for Pamphilus / than she did to bring me pleasure" (698). She makes a living from selling jewelry and match-making, and in the specific case discussed here assumes the role of a priest to whom the lover confesses, asking for her help in his desperation: "I want to talk to you as if in penitence" (703, 1). Though she complains about not being recompensed for all her efforts (717), the young man promises her great payment for her work on his behalf: "you shall have help and payment for all your work" (720, 3). The lady, in turn, proves to be highly resistant, so the go-between resorts to lying and indicates to the young man that he can hope to win his lady's love soon: "'My friend,' said the old crone, 'I see that / the lady loves you and desires you'" (807, 1–2).⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Juan Ruiz, *The Book of Good Love*, trans. Elizabeth Drayson MacDonald (London: Everyman, 1999).

⁵⁷ See also Homet, *Los viejos y la vejez*, 201–06, for further examples of the satirical treatment of old age in medieval Spanish literature. For the motif of the crone in Western literature from the Greek antiquity through the Middle Ages and modernity, see Lois W. Banner, *In Full Flower: Aging Women, Power, and Sexuality: a History* (New York: Knopf, 1992). See also Gretchen Mieszkowski, *Medieval Go-Betweens and Chaucer's Pandarus*. The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); see also her contribution to this volume. For examples of old women in medieval and early modern Italian literature, see Patrizia Bettella, *The Ugly Woman: Transgressive Aesthetic*

Seduction then actually happens, but the happy outcome is denied, which ultimately leads the narrator to warn his female audience about old women: "Beware of false old women, of a bad neighbour's laughter" (909, 3). Of course, the topical nature of this characterization cannot be overlooked, although it still demonstrates how much older women were commonly cast as evil-minded, lusting for money, and free of any moral values, serving whomever they liked, as long as the payment was right.⁵⁸ Sometimes these old match-makers are successful, but sometimes they fail miserably, which invites the audiences to laugh at these sinister old female characters, such as in the Middle High German short verse narrative, "Alten wibes list" — also known as "Frau Metze" — composed by a poet who is only known as "Der arme Konrad" (perhaps late fourteenth century).⁵⁹

But the critical point for us would not be so much the perpetuation of the topos of the old match-maker, which Ruiz, like many other medieval and Renaissance writers and artists, certainly pursued.⁶⁰ On the contrary, the old woman here emerges as an important instrument in the negotiations for love, hence as the key figure in the triangular relationship without whom the man would never be able to build a bridge to his lady.⁶¹ If any literary character could serve as proof for the

Models in Italian Poetry from the Middle Ages to the Baroque. Toronto Italian Studies (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

⁵⁸ Tim G. Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World: A Cultural and Social History* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 86, 246, 257–58; Philippe Moreau, in his review of Parkin's study (*International Journal of the Classic Tradition* 12, 3 [2006]: 449–52; here 449, correctly comments: as regards 'old age' "notre époque porte un intérêt teinté d'inquiétudes post-industrielles occidentales." He also underscores the amorphous, sometimes even ambivalent attitude toward old age within the Roman world, as identified by Parkin, 452: "Rome n'a pas élaboré un concept unifié et bien circonscrit de 'vieillesse' (pas plus d'ailleurs qu'un concept de 'famille' ou de 'parentèle', malgré l'importance de ces faits sociaux), et a laissé subsister, à côté d'une notion de la pensée commune, au périmètre assez vague, des définitions légales multiples en termes d'âge, selon les enjeux sociaux en cause: on repère des règles d'âge, mais pas de classes d'âge; le sort réel des vieillards dépendait de leur statut social et de leur santé physique et mentale, et de l'aléatoire *pietas* de leurs descendants plus que de normes positives." In many respects, this evaluative commentary will find confirmation in our investigations of the concept of 'old age' in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. For a modern, geriatric, perspective, see Jean M. Coyle, *Handbook on Women and Aging* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997).

⁵⁹ Werner Williams-Krapp, "Der arme Konrad," *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters: Verfasserlexikon*. 2nd, compl. rev. and expanded ed. Kurt Ruh et al. Vol. 1 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1978), 454–55, only summarizes what Hanns Fischer, *Studien zur deutschen Märendichtung*. 2., durchgesehene und erweiterte Aufl. besorgt von Johannes Janota (1968; Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1983), 197, had already observed.

⁶⁰ Anouk Janssen, "The Iconography of Old Age and Rembrandt's Early Work," *Rembrandt's Mother: Myth and Reality*. Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Christiaan Vogelaar and G. Korevaar (Zwolle: Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal Leiden, 2005), 53–66; here 55–56. She also surveys the iconographic motif of the pious old woman, mostly involved in a pious, religious activity, reading the Bible or other texts, 57–60.

⁶¹ See, for example, Charles T. Wood, "La Vielle, Free Love, and Boethius in the *Roman de la Rose*,"

considerable interest in old age during the Middle Ages, then it would be this Trotaconventos, who has hundreds of sisters in all of European and other literatures.⁶² As countless poetic and narrative text examples illustrate, "When other powers failed, many old women were sought out as a last resort. This was done, of course, in secret, for the risks to the seekers were many."⁶³ The next most important figure, as intriguing and duplicitous as Trotaconventos, would certainly be La Vieille in Jean de Meun's part of the *Roman de la rose*, closely modeled on Ovid's *Ars amatoria*, who "makes a long speech addressed to Bel Acueil on the ways in which women might pursue and manipulate men with maximum financial gain and minimum emotional risk."⁶⁴ Artists obviously found her as fascinating as the general audience of the *Roman*, considering the numerous and highly detailed visual depictions of her in countless manuscript illustrations.⁶⁵

Then, on the other hand, aging ladies could exert a tremendously powerful role, both publicly or more in the mysterious background, as impressively demonstrated by Morgne la Faye (Morgan le Fay) in the anonymous fourteenth-century alliterative romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. At first introduced as an ugly looking, hoary, and almost disgusting old person, in strong contrast to the youthful beauty displayed by the young Lady Bercilak, wife of the host of castle Hautdesert, she emerges at the end as the most powerful, learned, and influential lady who controls the entire court from behind the scenes, both threatening and daunting, but also enigmatic, intriguing, and mysterious. Gawain encounters both women at the same time and immediately displays the expected reaction—delight in the feminine beauty of the young, and disgust of the old courtly lady:

When the lady longed to look at the knight,
She proceeded from her pew with many pretty maidens.
She was the fairest in skin, in stature, and in face,
And in form, and color, with captivating features,

Revue de Littérature Comparée 51 (1977): 336–42; Dominique Luce-Dudemaine, "La Vieille Femme, l'amour, et le temps perdu," *Veillesse et vieillissement au Moyen Age*, 217–25.

⁶² Barbara G. Walker, *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom, and Power* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985); Joseph T. Snow, "Some Literary Portraits of the Old Woman in Medieval and Early Modern Spain," *'Entra mayo y sale abril': Medieval Spanish Literary and Folklore Studies in Memory of Harriet Goldberg*, ed. Manuel da Costa Fontes and id. Juan de la Cuesta Hispanic Monographs. Series Homenajes, 25 (Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta, 2005), 349–63; here 356–57.

⁶³ Snow, "Some Literary Portraits," 354.

⁶⁴ Marilyn Desmond, *Ovid's Art and the Wife of Bath: The Ethics of Erotic Violence* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), 99–100.

⁶⁵ Alcuin Blamires and Gail C. Holian, *The Romance of the Rose Illuminated: Manuscripts at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth*. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 223 (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2002), 59.

And more gorgeous than Guenevere, concluded Gawain.
 To cherish that champion, through the chancel she passed.
 Another lady did lead her by the left hand,
 Much older than she, an ancient one, it seemed,
 And held highly in honor by humans round about.
 But, looking at those ladies revealed little likeness,
 For if the young wife was winsome, withered was the other.
 Rich red on the one face rose there in splendor;
 Rough, wrinkled cheeks rolled down on the other.
 Kerchiefs on the one, with many clear pearls,
 Beautifully displayed her breast and bright throat,
 Shining sheerer than snow that sheds on hills.
 That other with a gorget was geared over the neck,
 Fastened around her chapped chin with chalk-white veils;
 Her forehead was fashioned in silk, fixed firmly there,
 Edged and interlaced with trefoils about,
 So that bared on that body were only black eyebrows,
 The two eyes and the nose, the naked lips,
 And those were sour to see, and shockingly prominent.
 An honored lady on earth one may call her,

before God.

Her body was short and thick,
 Her buttocks broad and odd;
 The other's gait was quick,
 As they together trod.⁶⁶

Gawain's reactions upon the appearance of these two ladies speaks volumes about the dialectics of old age. Whereas he favors the young, he trembles at the old, though he shows her honor: "The older he hails, bowing in honor; / The fairer one he favors with a friendly embrace" (972-73).⁶⁷ As Lord Bercilak reveals at the conclusion of the narratives, she is in charge of everything and pulls the strings of all men: "No one possesses such high pride / Whom she can not make very tame" (2454-55). Nevertheless, despite all the power that she yields, Bercilak reminds Gawain: "She is actually your aunt, Arthur's half-sister, / Daughter of the Duchess

⁶⁶ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Dual-Language Version*, ed. and trans. William Vantuono. Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1265 (New York and London: Garland, 1991), 941-69.

⁶⁷ There is much research on the old lady, Morgan La Fee, see, for instance, Edith Williams, "Morgan La Fee as Trickster in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Folklore* 96 (1985): 38-56; Sheila Fisher, "Leaving Morgan Aside: Women, History, and Revisionism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, ed. Thelma S. Fenster. Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1499 (New York and London: Garland, 1996), 77-95; Michael W. Twomey, "Morgan le Fay at Hautdesert," *On Arthurian Women: Essays in Memory of Maureen Fries*, ed. Bonnie Wheeler and Fiona Tolhurst (Dallas, TX: Scriptorium, 2001), 103-19; Gail Ashton, "The Perverse Dynamics of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Arthuriana* 15, 3 (2005): 51-74.

of Tintagel, with whom dear Uther after / Had the noble Arthur, who is now high king" (2464–66). Suddenly, after many turmoils, the truth comes out: both Gawain, and with him the court of King Arthur, and especially Queen Guenever, had been challenged, and the entire Christmas game ("gomme," 283) had served as a test, perhaps a blasphemous one, and certainly a test hardly any human could have passed successfully. In this sense, Gawain's slight wound at his neck from Bercilak's ax reminds him of his mortality and humbleness, but it also transforms his attitude toward the old lady who emerges as the most powerful and ominous old person who seems to hold enough power to control life and death.⁶⁸ As Setsuko Haruta observes regarding Gawain's behavior: "By greeting Bertilak's young wife with a kiss, and dismissing the elderly lady with formal courtesy, he shows dramatically that he has failed to notice the close kinship and essential identity in the two women."⁶⁹

Modern psychoanalytic feminism has not been able to look beyond very narrow binary images of the old woman and has almost uniformly identified the elderly woman's position in life as a double marginality: "the male fear of woman as the all-engulfing mother is exacerbated when women grow old; moreover, in psychoanalysis the attraction to the mother is understood as taboo, and the older woman necessarily occupies the position of the mother or, worse, the grandmother."⁷⁰ Joseph T. Snow, from a folkloristic and literary perspective, adds weight to this observation: "The formerly 'natural' figure of the Old Woman-Crone became denatured over time. Male fear of women as sexual beings took on the shape of the *vagina dentata*. Widows were thought to be useless, frequently

⁶⁸ For intriguing parallels in contemporary Middle English romances, see Jean Jost, "Margins in Middle English Romance: Culture and Characterization in *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*," *Meeting the Foreign in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 133–52; here 142–51. See also Geoffrey Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*, where the old lady also suddenly transforms into a young woman.

⁶⁹ Setsuko Haruta, "The Women in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Arthurian Romance and Gender: Selected Proceedings of the XVIIth International Arthurian Congress*, ed. Friedrich Wolfzettel. Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft, 10 (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, 1995), 206–14; here 211. She also emphasizes, as the conclusion of her analysis, 214: "Thus defying the simple view of women hitherto taken in literary works, the three figures are related and integrated to present a more humanized image of the courtly lady in her entity. As the male protagonist, through his disillusionment and failure, gains much in depth and humanity in the course of the poem, the female triad succeed in forming an integrated view of women as a complex human being."

⁷⁰ Kathleen Woodward, "Tribute to the Older Woman: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Ageism," *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life*, ed. Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 79–96; here 87. See also Dennis Moore, "Making Sense of an Ending: Morgan le Fay in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Mediaevalia: A Journal of Mediaeval Studies* 10 (1984): 213–33.

sentenced to convent life, often shunned, and made to identify themselves by the wearing of the black badge, or widow's weeds. This fallen Eve-Mother was relegated to the furthest margins of society. What had been the Crone's great wisdom and knowledge was stigmatized by man's fear that her revelations might touch and slander him. She possessed an 'evil eye' with which to see into men's souls and read their secrets, and to feel this eye's gaze was decried as a certain harbinger of death."⁷¹ In the hilarious poems by the Bavarian-Austrian poet Neidhart (fl. 1220–1240), the old lustful mother who desires sexual experiences with the satirical figure Neidhart von Reuenthal (nom de plume), is repeatedly scoffed at, though the outburst of sexual energy in such an old person still represents an element of deep concern for the male poet and his audience.⁷²

It would not come as a surprise that Geoffrey Chaucer has much to say about old age, considering that his *Canterbury Tales* serves in so many ways as a kaleidoscope of late medieval English society. In fact, Chaucer must have had a very good insight and understanding of the vast array of human characters, attitudes, ideals, values, and desires, as he repeatedly addressed the issue of old age, sometimes by itself, sometimes in contrast to youth. In *The Pardoner's Tale*, for instance, the old man laments about the loss of his youth and his inability to find any young person willing to change place with him:

This olde man gan looke in his visage,
And seyde thus: "For I ne kan nat fynde
A man, though that I walked into Ynde,
Neither in citee ne in no village,
That wolde chaunge his youthe for myn age;
And therefore moot I han myn age stille,
.....
Thus walke I, lyk a resteleees kaityf,
And on the ground, which is my moodres gate,
I knokke with my staf, bothe erly and late,
And seye, 'Leeve mooder, leet me in!
Lo how I varysshe, flesshe, and blood, and skyn!
(720–32)⁷³

In *The Merchant's Tale*, the contrast between young and old finds its perhaps most ironic description, ridiculing, if not scathingly, the lustful, but impotent husband:

⁷¹ Snow, "Some Literary Portraits," 352–53.

⁷² Siegfried Beyschlag, *Die Lieder Neidharts: Der Textbestand der Pergament-Handschriften und die Melodien*. Text und Übertragung, Einführung und Worterklärungen, Konkordanz. Edition der Melodien by Horst Brunner (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), L 15–16, L 69–72; cf. Ann Marie Rasmussen, *Mothers and Daughters in Medieval German Literature* (Albany, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 163–88.

⁷³ Quoted from: *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

And Januarie hath faste in armes take
 His fresshe May, his paradys, his make.
 He lulleth hire; he kisseth hire ful ofte;
 With thikke brustles of his berd unsofte,
 Lyk to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere —
 For he was shave al newe in his manere —
 He rubbeth hire aboute hir tendre face,
 And seyde thus, "Allas! I moot trespace
 To yow, my spouse, and yow greetly offende
 Et tyme come that I wil down descende.

.....

And upright in his bed thanne sitteth he,
 And after that he sang ful loude and cleere,
 And kiste his wyf, and made wantown cheere.
 He was al coltish, ful of ragerye,
 And ful of jargon as a flekked pye.
 The slakke skyn aboute his nekke shaketh
 Whil that he sang, so chaunteth he and craketh.
 But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte,
 Whan she hum saugh up sittynge in his sherte,
 In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene;
 She preyseth nat his pleyying worth a bene.

Thanne seide he thus, "My reste wol I take;
 Now day is come, I may no lenger wake."

(1821–56)

But perhaps one other voice might deserve to be consulted here because it is so idiosyncratic and yet so representative of the late Middle Ages as well, especially with regard to its outlook on old age. The South-Tyrolean poet Oswald von Wolkenstein (1376/77–1445), today so famous for his autobiographical travel, love, and social-political songs, also reflected many times about old age and imminent death.⁷⁴ In his song "Wie vil ich sing und tichte" (KI 23), for instance, the narrative

⁷⁴ Until today there is no complete English translation of his songs available. But see the historical-critical edition of his oeuvre, *Die Lieder Oswalds von Wolkenstein*, ed. Karl Kurt Klein et al. 3rd rev. and expanded ed. Altdutsche Textbibliothek, 55 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1987); for an introduction to his biography and work, see Albrecht Classen, "Oswald von Wolkenstein," *The Literary Encyclopedia* June 18, 2004; online version at: *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 18. June 2004. The Literary Dictionary Company. <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=5559> (last accessed on Oct. 13, 2006). The standard biography was written by Anton Schwob, *Oswald von Wolkenstein: Eine Biographie*. 3rd ed. Schriftenreihe des Südtiroler Kulturinstitutes, 4 (1977; Bozen: Verlagsanstalt Athesia, 1989); see also id., *Historische Realität und literarische Umsetzung: Beobachtungen zur Stilisierung der Gefangenschaft in den Liedern Oswalds von Wolkenstein*. Innsbrucker Beiträge zur

voice offers a melancholy estimation of the world in light of the certain coming of death (4–5). Very much in line with common images and themes of the death of dance, or *memento mori*, Oswald warns his listeners of the painful death: “mit scharpfen, klügen lätzen / er jedem richten kan” (11–12; with sharp tricky traps he can bring everyone to justice). There would never be any peace with death who is taking everyone with him, but the poet deems himself lucky to have avoided his snares so far (15–16), though he knows that at the end death would find him as well (32). Subsequently he lists various occasions in his life when he would have almost died in an accident, but miraculously survived. Nevertheless, despite his many adventures, Oswald bemoans the fact that the “richter” (141; judge) would come for him for sure soon and hang him (“mit seinem strengen sail” (142; with his painful rope). He concludes his song with general advice to everyone in his audience to repent their sins and to prepare themselves for the afterlife because death would arrive without any preparation: “heut frisch, starck, morgen krenklich / und über morgen tod” (157–58; today fresh, strong, tomorrow sickly, and the following day death).

Warning young men not to trust their own beauty and strength, Oswald casts himself in Kl. 5 as an old man who has learned the bitter lesson and turned to God (44). More specifically, however, he describes himself as physically old: “seid mir der leib von alder ist enwicht” (48; since my body has lost its value). His eye-sight has become blurry: “Für ainen siech ich allzeit vier” (49; instead of one I always see four [as if in a mirror]); and his hearing has become bad, though this might even be a blessing because the children have already begun to mock at him already: “und hör durch groben stain, / die kindlin spotten mein nu schier” (50–51; and I hear as if through thick rock how the children make fun of me). Even young ladies laugh at him (52), which, however, he has brought upon himself as a result of his failings in his youth (53). Consequently, once again, Oswald appeals to his audience— young men and women (54)— to turn to God out of fear of the afterlife, a powerful reflection of the poet’s psychological condition, refracted through his verses.⁷⁵

But there is also a strategy behind the use of these images because this song constitutes a genre by itself, dedicated to old age, as the introductory verses clearly indicate, which cast an image of an old man as no other medieval poet before Oswald has created, as Sieglinde Hartmann emphasizes.⁷⁶ Most dramatically he

Kulturwissenschaft. Germanistische Reihe, 9 (Innsbruck: Institut für Germanistik der Universität Innsbruck, 1979). The theme of old age in Oswald’s poetry has been recently touched upon by Bernd-Ulrich Hergemöller, *Die Kindlein spotten meiner schier*, 2006, 52–54, 115–16.

⁷⁵ Max Siller, “Oswald von Wolkenstein. Versuch einer psychohistorischen Rekonstruktion,” *Mediaevistik* 19 (2006): 125–52; here 143–44.

⁷⁶ Sieglinde Hartmann, *Altersdichtung und Selbstdarstellung bei Oswald von Wolkenstein: Die Lieder Kl 1 bis 7 im spätmittelalterlichen Kontext*. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 288 (Göppingen:

details the concrete effects of old age on his body, almost playfully focusing on his pale color, his red eyes, his bending over, shaking of his limbs, and the loss of his strong voice. Moreover, his dark hair is turning gray, if he is not losing it altogether: "dasselb plasniert sich swarz und graw, / von schilden kal durch schöcket" (21–22; it is flattened and a blend of black and grey, with several bald spots). Oswald does not even shy away from describing his failing teeth which no longer allow him to chew properly.

All wealth in this world would not allow him to renew them since old age is irreversible: "Plöd, ungevar / sind mir die zend, und slawnt mir nicht ze keuen, / und het ich aller werlde güt, / ich künd ir nicht verneuen" (25–28). However, even this most realistic poetic self-portrait suddenly reveals its topical nature, especially because the individual elements can be traced to various Old-French (Adam de la Halle) and Middle High German sources (Hugo von Trimberg).⁷⁷

Significantly, Oswald's contemporary French poet François Villon created a quite similar old-age song, performed by the Parisian courtesan, Heaulmière ("la belle qui fut"), who bitterly complains about the effects of old age: "Where has that smooth forehead gone, / That blond hair and those arching brows, / Widely spaced eyes, that playful look / With which I'd catch the wariest ones, / That fine, straight nose, not big or small, / And those well-modeled little ears, / That dimpled chin, bright, shapely face, / And those so-lovely crimson lips."⁷⁸ But again, the obviously literary, topical nature of these laments about the loss of youth has to be kept in mind in the critical evaluation, although even the fact that these topical images were so popular can be regarded as evidence for the great interest in old age in the premodern era, providing material both for serious religious warnings about the approaching death, and for literary entertainment by way of the satirical, sometime even parodic, use of these images.⁷⁹

Indeed, at closer examination, despite growing old, Oswald tends to play the nostalgic lover who cannot forget the ladies from his youth: "ich kan ir nimmer werden sat, / die weil ich alde" (Kl. 90, 20–21; I can never get enough of them [in my thoughts] while I am growing old). Indeed, despite his numerous moral and religious allusions and warnings, Oswald regularly returned to his typical satirical self-reflections and laughed about the physical signs of his growing old. In "Wol mich an we der lieben stund" (Kl. 63), for instance, he reminisces about his sexual contacts with women in his earlier days, and dreams of the possibility of a repeat.

Kümmerle, 1980), 155–62.

⁷⁷ Hartmann, *Altersdichtung*, 158–59.

⁷⁸ Hartmann, *Altersdichtung*, 164–68, cites a German translation. The English translation is taken from François Villon, *Complete Poems*, ed. with English trans. and commentary by Barbara N. Sargent-Baur. Toronto Medieval Texts and Translations, 9 (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1994), no. 47, pp. 85–89; here stanza 52, 493–500.

⁷⁹ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 237.

Imagining touching a woman's breast, he sings: "käm mir die blösslich an die brust, / so wär mein greisen gar umb susst, / der bart müsst weichen von der heut, / mir zerunn denn messer oder leut" (23–26; if her naked breast touched my chest my turning to an old man would be reversed; the beard would be shaven, unless I would not have a razor or a barber at hand). He obviously teases the literary tradition of the topos involving an old man and a young woman,⁸⁰ yet tweaks it in such a way as to transform it into a seemingly autobiographical statement.

From a woman's perspective, Villon has his courtesan lament almost in the same fashion, and also evoke the same sensuality from the past: "The forehead wrinkled, hair turned grey, / The eyebrows fallen, eyes grown dim, / Which used to give out looks and smiles / By which a lot of fools were caught, / Hooked nose, from beauty far removed, / Ears pendulous and sprouting hairs, / The face pale, dead, its colour gone, / Chin puckered, lips reduced to skin—" (54, 509–16).⁸¹ In the sixteenth century the debate between old age and youth continued unabated, as various works by the Nuremberg Mastersinger Hans Sachs (1494–1576) indicate.⁸² He fully recognized the various types of literary discourses (old age versus youth) and recommended to both age groups to recognize each other as mutually dependent because old people once used to be young, whereas the young ought to pay respect to the old: "Halt es ehrlich, wie du auff erden / Im alter wilt gehalten werden" (59, 16–17; Handle it honestly here on earth just as you would like to be treated in old age). After all, as Sachs also emphasizes in "Die sibben alter eins menschen nach art der sibben planeten" (73–78; also from 1554), each person goes through various stages in life—here divided into seven—and at the end of one's life people become childish again and need sustenance and support (77, 29–78, 5).

As the few references to literary examples have already illustrated, the scope of relevant material promises to be rich, complex, and diversified. We can be certain that old age per se never automatically implied respect, contempt, or disregard, as Pat Thane correctly emphasizes: "People of any age earned respect by their actions or because their wealth and power enforced deference. Rich old people

⁸⁰ Rudolf Schenda, "Alte Leute," *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, ed. Kurt Ranke. Vol. 1 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1977), 373–80.

⁸¹ See, for example, J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 155–56. For the slightly different tradition of male poets hurling insults at old women (*vituperium in vetulam*), see Fabian Alfie, "The Violent Poetics of Inversion, or the Inversion of Violent Poetics: Meo dei Tolomei, His Mother, and the Italian Tradition of Comic Poetry," *Violence in Medieval Courtly Literature: A Casebook*, ed. Albrecht Classen. Routledge Medieval Casebooks (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 207–23; here 215–19. For examples of the old hag in Middle English literature, see Jean E. Jost, "Margins in Middle English Romance: Culture and Characterization in *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*," 133–52.

⁸² See, for example, Sachs's "Kampff-gesprech. Das alter mit der jugend" from 1534; Hans Sachs, ed. Adelbert von Keller. Vol. 4 (1870; Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1964), 31–59.

might be venerated, outwardly at least. Poor old people might be cared for by the community, or ostracized and neglected." She also cites, in the same paragraph, a seventeenth-century voice from a witchcraft trial: "The children call all old people witches."⁸³

Historians approaching the topic of old age tend to pursue it mostly through the lense of clerical authors, such as when Georges Minois asserts that in the early Middle Ages old men were commonly regarded with suspicion because "Like suffering and death, old age formed part of Adam's painful legacy."⁸⁴ Drawing from Patristic literature, he underscores the theologians' standard opinion: "Lascivious, miserly, choleric, greedy and egoistical, old men were hotbeds of vice, which was all the more unforgivable in that their experience and wisdom were supposed to direct them towards the good."⁸⁵ An excellent example for this general opinion can also be found in the gnomic poetry by the Viennese gnomic poet Heinrich der Teichner (fl. middle of the fourteenth century — probably a lay preacher), who closely correlated old age with greed in his poem "Gespräch mit der Weisheit" (No. 564; Discussion with Wisdom). Resorting to a proverbial statement, Teichner emphasizes: "den man vast umb gut sicht werben, / daz man spricht: 'er wil recht sterben; / er ist geitig worden im alter.' / so der leichnam wirt ye chalter, / so ye vaster print der muet / in der geitichait nach guet" (he whom you see grabbing for goods conforms to the proverb: 'he wants to die properly, he has become greedy in old age.' The colder the body becomes [according to the teachings of the humors],⁸⁶ the more he develops a strong desire greedily to accumulate wealth).⁸⁷

But Rolf Sprandel's critical survey of Pauline exegesis by medieval theologians from the fourth century (the Ambrosiaster) via the *Glossa ordinaria* (1117), Peter Lombard (1160), Hugo of Sancto Caro (1263), Thomas Aquinas, Nicholas of Lyra (1349), and the Anonymous Augustinian (1504) indicates that old age was a topic of hot debate within the academic circles of the Church, for example, whether old people deserve honor and respect naturally, or whether for social reasons, and how to treat foolish old people. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, argued that priests had the task to pay respect to old people and to treat them honorably. Nicholas of Lyra, on the other hand, encouraged priests to guard old people and to make sure

⁸³ Pat Thane, "The Age of Old Age," *The Long History of Old Age*, ed. Eadem (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 9–29; here 14.

⁸⁴ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 121.

⁸⁵ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 123.

⁸⁶ For a discussion of the stages of life in astronomical and astrological terms, see the contribution to this volume by Harry Peters.

⁸⁷ *Die Gedichte Heinrichs des Teichners*, ed. Heinrich Niewöhner. Deutsche Texte des Mittelalters, XLVIII (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1956), 52.

that they do not transgress social, ethical, and moral norms. In other words, in contrast to the ancient world with its automatic worship of old people the medieval church increasingly realized the need to differentiate between worthy and foolish old people.⁸⁸

Surprisingly, when turning to vernacular literature, such as *Beowulf*, Minois observes only ambiguity toward old age, discontent, and frustration on the part of the old hero because of the failure of their bodies.⁸⁹ Then, however, Minois refers to the various councils of elders among tribal societies, and also among the Merovingians, and subsequently the Carolingians, who made possible the survival of the respective dynasty over a long period of time despite the fairly high mortality rate among its young rulers.⁹⁰ Unfortunately, concluding his chapter, Minois suddenly argues that "the early Middle Ages were decidedly not concerned about [old age]."⁹¹ With respect to the high Middle Ages, however, the author claims that the opposite was the case then: "Far from considering old age as a rarity, it was given a vital place, and was made to begin at around 50 years, thus following directly on youth."⁹² But he also offers the observation regarding the literary evidence: "Romances and poems emanating both from clerical and lay milieux agree in decrying the vices, the ugliness and the horror of old age."⁹³ Nevertheless, to some extent the examples he used represent extreme cases, whereas numerous alternative voices are not consulted. By the same token, the contradictions grow in number, so when he claims that "theologians took little interest in the old,"⁹⁴ but then cites, among others, St. Bernard to confirm that old age represented wisdom and virtue, and a crucial springboard for the soul to free itself from its bodily prison.⁹⁵ Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), for instance, had described old age as the natural ripening/maturing process of an individual:

The soul reveals her capabilities according to the capabilities of the body, so that in childhood she brings forth simplicity, in youth strength, and in the fullness of age, when all the veins of the human being are full, she brings forth her greatest strength in wisdom. In the same way a tree in its first growth brings forth tender shoots, goes on then to bear fruit and finally ripens that fruit to the fullness of utility. But afterwards in old age when a human being's bones and veins incline to weakness, then the soul reveals gentler strengths, as though tired of human knowledge. In the same

⁸⁸ Rolf Sprandel, "Das Verhalten gegenüber alten Leuten: Die Geschichte der Exegese eines Paulus-Textes im Mittelalter," *Saeculum* 30 (1979): 365-73; I would like to thank Peter Dinzelbacher for pointing out this study to me.

⁸⁹ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 135.

⁹⁰ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 154.

⁹¹ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 155.

⁹² Minois, *History of Old Age*, 160.

⁹³ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 163.

⁹⁴ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 167.

⁹⁵ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 169.

way, at the onset of wintertime, the sap of the tree withdraws from the laves and branches as the tree begins to incline towards old age.⁹⁶

We can agree with Minois that "The men of the Middle Ages were thus preoccupied with age, both in the world of learning as well as that of ordinary people."⁹⁷ But we always need to keep in mind the slippery path of his arguments, veering one way, then the other as in his comments on medieval attitudes toward old age. On the one hand he argues that "[t]he Church's splendid indifference towards age is further revealed in the timeless stylization of Romanesque statuary, in which old men are chiefly identified by their beards . . . Men and women are eternally young and beautiful. The venerable character of old saints and prophets is symbolized by a magnificent beard, as on the cathedral portals of Chartres and Rheims."⁹⁸ On the other hand, he alerts his readers to the relativity of his own statements: "We should not be misled by the relative indifference to age which characterizes the work of the moralists, theologians and artists of the classical Middle Ages. In fact, the men of that period paid great attention to the passage of time and to ageing."⁹⁹

This observation demonstrates that the old were relatively numerous, but our assessment today of the lives of old people in premodern times depends much on the material we use for our investigation. People would not have attributed so much importance to a phase in life achieved by only a tiny minority.¹⁰⁰ Would it indeed be true that "Chivalry was not kind to old men once they had grown too weak for fighting. But it was not old age so much as weakness which was derided, because any young and inept squire would be treated just as harshly."¹⁰¹ Of course, the loss of strength was lamented by the old warrior and his family and friends, but it remains to be seen whether this also meant in general that romance authors harbored nothing but contempt or disregard for their old protagonists. And without jumping to any conclusions, we can easily confirm that the opposite was mostly the case.¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Hildegard von Bingen, *Scivias*, I, 4.17, here cited from Hildegard of Bingen, *Selected Writings*, transl. with an introd. and notes by Mark Atherton. Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2003), 6.

⁹⁷ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 179.

⁹⁸ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 170.

⁹⁹ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 171.

¹⁰⁰ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 179.

¹⁰¹ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 189.

¹⁰² A remarkable example to the opposite would be the most remarkable English baron and leading politician of his time, William Marshall, Earl of Pembroke, who died in 1219 at the age of seventy-two. As David Crouch, *William Marshal: Court, Career and Chivalry in the Angevin Empire 1147–1219* (London and New York: Longman, 1990), 129, affirms: "Until his sickness he had been a hale old man; a stranger to illness." See also the verse biography, *History of William Marshal*, ed. A. J. Holden, with English trans. by S. Gregory and historical notes by D. Crouch. 2 Vols. Occasional Publications Series, 4, 5 (London: Anglo-Norman Text Society, 2002, 2004), 2:307ff. The poet confirms: "once it

In Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Titurel* (ca. 1220), for instance, the grandfather of the Grail family certainly laments the passing of time and his inability to bear arms now in his old age, but he is given full respect by the author through granting him the first words of the fragmentary romance.¹⁰³ He was, after all, the founder of the family, and he can look back to a glorious career, which his own son, Frimutel, now continues on his behalf. As *Titurel* comments, "Alas Frimutel, my sweet son, I have you alone of my children remaining here for the Grail! Now, my fair son, receive the crown of the Grail and the Grail itself . . . On one occasion your wheel was stuck, and I had to pull you out of the fray. Now defend yourself alone, my son, for my strength is deserting both of us."¹⁰⁴ But instead of pushing this old man aside without much regard for his destiny, the opposite is the case: "Knights and ladies heard what he said, and much heartfelt grief could be seen in the Templars, whom he had often saved from many a difficult situation when he was defending the Grail with his own hand and with their aid."¹⁰⁵

Old age, however, even when coupled with wisdom, does not necessarily imply respect and honor, as Geoffrey Chaucer's *Tale of Melibee* teaches us, where the wise and old man cannot gain his audience's attention and has to realize that they are not interested in peaceful, philosophical, moral, and ethical counsel; instead both Melibee and the majority of his friends are eager for war and simply ignore what the old man might have to say: "And whan this wise man saugh that hym wanted audience, al shamefast he sette hym doun agayn. / For Salomon seith: 'Ther as thou ne mayst have noon audience, enforce thee nat to speke.' / 'I see wel,' quod this wise man, 'that the commune proverbe is sooth, that 'good conseil wanteth whan it is moost nede.'"¹⁰⁶ Another great example can be found in Hans Wilhelm

was seen that he was to die, there was great sorrow. / Yet, although he was in pain, he rode / as far as the Tower of London. / Doctors from various parts of the country came to his side, / but they were very little use to him; / there was little point in their coming, / for they could do absolutely nothing for him . . . Many who loved him with great affection / advised him, / in the name of God, to make his will. / In my opinion he did so / most wisely" (17884–907).

¹⁰³ For further discussions of the old man *Titurel*, see Rasma Laszda-Cazers's contribution to this volume.

¹⁰⁴ Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Titurel and the Songs*. Texts and Translations with Introduction, Notes and Comments by Marion E. Gibbs and Sidney M. Johnson. Garland Library of Medieval Literature. Series A, 57 (New York and London: Garland, 1988), stanzas 7 and 8.

¹⁰⁵ *Titurel*, stanza 11. See also the contribution to this volume by Rasma Lazda-Cazers who offers more complex perspectives and discusses the curiously different identification of old *Titurel* in Wolfram's *Parzival* and in his *Titurel*.

¹⁰⁶ *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, VII, 1045. See now Ulrike Graßnick, *Ratgeber des Königs: Fürstenspiegel und Herrscherideale im spätmittelalterlichen England*. Europäische Kulturstudien, 15 (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau, 2004), 255–56. Her focus, however, rests primarily on the didactic teachings offered by Melibee's wife Prudence. This is a common feature in Chaucer studies, see, for example, Karla Taylor, "Social Aesthetics and the Emergence of Civic Discourse from the Shipman's Tale to Melibee," *Chaucer Review* 39, 3 (2005): 298–322. For further insights into the social-

Kirchhof's (ca. 1525–ca. 1603) *Wendunmuth* (seven volumes, 1569–1603), a quasi encyclopedic collection of entertaining, yet didactic, prose narratives, based on countless sources in late medieval and early modern European literature, but also on his own personal experiences.¹⁰⁷ In "Ein recept einer apotekerin" (no. 111; the prescription of a pharmacist's wife) a recently widowed man at the age of seventy has married a young woman but cannot satisfy her sexual needs because he only wants to sleep at night and feels no desire for physical intimacy with her. Concerned about this conflict and looking for a medication we would call 'viagra' today he turns to professional help and reveals his problem to the pharmacist's wife because her husband is not at home. While she is pretending to look for some medicine for him, climbing higher and higher on a ladder, she deliberately pulls up her dress, revealing her legs even up to her knees. Since the sight of her body does not arouse him at all, whatever she might do, she simply tells him that nothing in the entire pharmacy would be of help for him because the sight of her exposed body did not stir anything in him: "Ohn not ist das, sagt sie, wenn euch das, so ir ietzung gesehen, kein kraft bringt, ist es vergeblich, wenn ihr auch schon die gantze apoteken mit allen büchssen fresset."¹⁰⁸ In the verse epimythion, Kirchhoff emphasizes that an old man and a young woman hardly ever can live peacefully with each other because of his lack of sexual potency, which then results in misery during day and night: "Doch an der that es nicht vermag, / Erhebt sich jamer nacht und tag" (144, vv. 7–8; indeed, it cannot be, there will be sorrow by day and night).

The popular opinion confirmed the validity of this observation, as we find, for instance, demonstrated by the song "Eine Jungfraw klaget über jhren Alten vnnd kalten Mann" (A Virgin Complained About Her Old and Cold Husband), contained as no. 15 in the anonymous *Venus-Gärtlein* from 1656.¹⁰⁹ Here the young woman has voluntarily married an old man because of his wealth, but he does not die as fast as she had expected, or hoped for, and the song serves as a forum for her laments about the misery for a young woman to live in marriage with an old man whom she does not love at all. If she had known, as the female voice

historical conflicts concerning old men in the second half of the fourteenth century, as reflected by Chaucer, see the contribution to this volume by Marilyn Sandidge.

¹⁰⁷ Though often not fully trustworthy, see the surprisingly detailed and accurate entry on this German Renaissance writer, Kirchhoff, in the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia* at: http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans-Wilhelm_Kirchhof (last accessed on Oct. 30, 2006).

¹⁰⁸ Hans Wilhelm Kirchhof, *Wendunmuth*, ed. Hermann Oesterley. Vol. 1. Bibliothek des Litterarischen Vereins in Stuttgart, XCV (1869; Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1980), 143.

¹⁰⁹ *Venus-Gärtlein: Ein Liederbuch des XVII. Jahrhunderts*. Nach dem Drucke von 1656 ed. Max Freiherrn von Waldberg (Halle a. d. S.: Max Niemeyer, 1896), 19–21. I am currently preparing a new monograph on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century songbooks in which I am also offering a detailed discussion of the *Venus-Gärtlein*.

underscores in stanza four, about the cold humor dominating an old man, obviously according to Galen's teachings, she would never have submitted under Cupid's arrows. In a later poem, "EY! Maegdlein darff ichs wagen" (No. 47; Oh Maid, May I Dare it!), an old man tries to seduce a young woman to marry him, promising to shower her with money, gold, and properties, but she refuses and rather enters a convent to wait for the time when her mother will have selected a young bridegroom for her.¹¹⁰

One of the reasons for some of the contradictory statements in Georges Minois's study simply result from the contradictory nature of the evidence, the evolution of the mental-historical concepts, affection toward old people, and the changing socio-economic conditions also for old people throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The other reason rests with Minois's personal approach in the study of this stage in human life, vacillating between absolutist claims and fine observations based on the close reading of texts and images.

Obviously trying to appeal to his readers by dramatizing the perception of old age in premodern times, for instance, he concludes: "According to western thought, old age is an evil, an infirmity and a dreary time of preparation for death. Even the latter is often envisaged with more sympathy than is decrepitude, because death means deliverance To be accepted, an old man must be a saint. Condemned to veneration or detestation, he no longer has the right to commit the slightest mistake, he who enjoys so much experience, he can no longer surrender to the slightest urge of the flesh, he who is so worn and shrivelled, he must be perfect, or he will become revolting and doting."¹¹¹

But almost every text, every painting or sculpture, chronicle, or other types of documents provides us with varying perspectives, either glorifying the old or ridiculing them, treating them with respect or with contempt, which David Vassberg has convincingly demonstrated on the basis of numerous sixteenth-century Spanish proverbs, tales, and jokes.¹¹² He seriously warns us to stay away from typical attempts by modern readers to generalize and to fall into the trap of stereotyping medieval and early modern attitudes toward old age: "Contemporary attitudes toward the rural Castilian elderly were as diverse as the elderly

¹¹⁰ This collection of seventeenth-century popular songs contains a number of other examples dealing with old men who would like to marry young women, such as "GERrn gesellt sich gleich vnd gleich" (Nr. 14; Those who are the same prefer to join); "EIn Alter sol den Krieg vnd auch die Liebe lassen" (Nr. 140; An old man should stay out of war and should forgo love); "SO ein Mann nicht kan verhaelen" (Nr. 141; When a man cannot hide [the urges of his soul]); and "MEin suesses Kind ich bitte" (Nr. 144; My dear child, may I ask).

¹¹¹ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 303.

¹¹² David Vassberg, "Old Age in Early Modern Castilian Villages," 145–65, *Power and Poverty: Old Age in the Pre-Industrial Past*, ed. Susannah R. Otaway, L. A. Botelho, and Katharine Kittredge. Contributions to the Study of Aging, 27 (Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 2002), 152–54.

themselves, often expressing opposite or even contradictory characteristics: healthy and infirm; wise and foolish; miserly and generous; and wealthy and impoverished."¹¹³

Whereas scholars in the field of classical antiquity and early modern studies have already made great strides in exploring the theme of old age, aging, and old people,¹¹⁴ Medieval Studies on the whole has only recently begun to embark on this research agenda.¹¹⁵ The focus has so far rested mostly on statements about old age by philosophers, theologians, and medical writers. This is well illustrated by Michael Goodich's monograph on the human life cycle in medieval thought (1989), in which we also come across a chapter on old age. According to Avicenna, as Goodich observes, old age sets in at about fifty because people are gradually losing their blood supply, whereas Thomas of Cantimpré (1201–1271) regarded the age of seventy as normal for old people, beyond which only *decrepita* set in.¹¹⁶ For many writers, such as St. Ambrose, old age offered the opportunity to repent and to regain the long desired wisdom to prepare for the afterlife. "Old age could thus be regarded as a time of moral behavior, like the palm tree which only bears fruit as it ages, not in its youth (*Wisdom* 4.9 . . .)" (147). By contrast, old age could lead to grumpiness, ill humor, a sharp tongue, and angry and morose disposition. According to Innocent III (d. 1216)'s *De contemptu mundi*, "The aged are easily challenged, but not easily revived; quick to believe, they are slow to disbelieve; quick to speak, but slow to listen and not slow to quarrel" (147). John of San Gemignano (d. 1333), in his *Summa de exemplis*, painted a most drastic image of old people, indicating his dread of the physical decline at this late stage in one's life time: "While the eyes grow blind, the ears hear with difficulty, the hair falls out, the face acquires a pallor, the teeth are reduced in number, the skin dries up, breathing becomes labored, the chest feels clogged, a cough roars, the knees tremble, swelling overcomes the ankles and feet" (147).

The failure of the body is, as Giles of Rome (1243–1316) confirmed in his *De regimine principum*, accompanied by a loss of the spirit of youth, with its

¹¹³ Vassberg, "Old Age in Early Modern Castilian Villages," 160. He admits, however, that old age generally represented a difficult economic time for these people.

¹¹⁴ Hartwin Brandt, *Wird auch silbern mein Haar: Eine Geschichte des Alters in der Antike* (Munich: Beck, 2002); Tim G. Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World: A Cultural and Social History* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). For the modern period, see *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500*, 2001.

¹¹⁵ In August 2005, a conference at the University of Tampere, Finland, under the heading "Passages from Antiquity to the Middle Ages II: Aging, Old Age and Death," forged various paths into this vast new field of Old Age Studies, focusing on demographic issues, bodily appearance of old age, marginalization of old people, the experience of death, funeral, memory, awareness of generational differences, and the wide variety of sources for the study of old age. For a brief summary, see <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=876> (last accessed on Oct. 13, 2006).

¹¹⁶ Michael E. Goodich, *From Birth to Old Age*, 146.

cheerfulness, open-mindedness, and friendliness. Goodich summarizes as follows: "The attributes of the aged—incredulity, suspicion, pusillanimity, illiberality, hopelessness, and immodesty—are the opposite of those found among the young" (148). Dante, on the other hand, underscored the significance of old age in the effort to achieve wisdom and knowledge, prudence, justice, bountifulness, and affability (148). Subsequently, Goodich turns his attention to medical advice proffered by Roger Bacon in his *Opus maius* (1266/1267) about how to compensate for the physical losses in one's body that lead to the typical traits of old age (152–53), and also formulated by Engelbert of Admont (ca. 1250–1331) in his *Liber de causis longaeuitatis hominum ante diluvium* of how to prolong one's life through a proper regimen of health and artificial means, and through a careful study of the stars to foresee physical problems (153). In fact, Engelbert believed that the average human life span was eighty-five years, thirty-five of which in old age (154).

Of course, everything depends on the context, and this heavily implies the economic conditions of an elderly person. Let us take a look at some data from the very early Middle Ages and from the post-medieval period. Martina Hartmann reports of the far-reaching new insights which the synergies of archeology and historical and literary studies can produce. According to analysis of skeletons found in numerous Merovingian cemeteries, the average age of the Frankish population seems to have been around twenty-five to thirty years. But she adds a number of caveats. First, as we have already observed above, the high infant mortality has to be factored in—every fifth newborn died before it might have reached the age of adulthood. But we also face the puzzling phenomenon that some of the cemeteries did not include any graves of children, perhaps because their brittle bones have been dissolved by now, or because children were buried separately, such as at the site of Sankt-Castor in Koblenz, Germany. Moreover, women commonly died between the ages of twenty-five and forty, which can be explained with references to complications during their pregnancy and delivery of their children. Robert Magnan gives the following estimate of age brackets in late thirteenth-century England: "Out of 100 people born during this period, an average of 350 reached age 40, 200 or so reached 50, perhaps 90 attained age 65, and a dozen would live to be 80 or older."¹¹⁷

On the average, using a different set of data, women in the age bracket of up to forty-five could expect to live four years less than men, which is also confirmed through chronicle accounts of Merovingian kings. Archeologists also discovered

¹¹⁷ Robert Magnan, "Sex and Senescence in Medieval Literature," *Aging in Literature*, 13–30, and 162–66; see also Josiah Cox Russell, *Late Ancient and Medieval Population*. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, New Series, 48, part 3 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1958, 30–33.

that a large percentage of women in their menopause suffered from osteoporosis, though this began to set in already between the ages of thirty and forty. On the other hand, if we trusted hagiographical literature in disregard of these archeological findings, we would assume that most Merovingian male and female rulers regularly reached the age of seventy and eighty, which now seem to be more the exception than the rule.¹¹⁸

Without going much further into statistical details, it deserves, however, to be pointed out that much archeological evidence to support these findings can be adduced for medieval Italy, and other parts of Europe, such as in the archeological site of Wenigumstadt, Germany, where the graves from the fifth through the eighth century demonstrated that those who died beyond the age of sixty made up 3.2% of the local population, whereas the regular adult population consisted of 18.5%. Jumping to fifteenth-century Italy, the rates for those beyond sixty were considerably higher: Florence (1427): 14.6% (beyond 60 years of age); Pisa (1428): 9% (beyond 66 years of age); Mantua (1575): 15% (older than 55 years of age); Rome (1643–1647): 18% (older than 55 years of age).¹¹⁹

Regarding seventeenth-century England, on the other hand, Keith Thomas suggests that “for those whose earning capacity depended on their physical strength, old age had little to commend it.”¹²⁰ Louise Gray refers to it approvingly in support of her study of the aged and paupers in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Hesse/Germany, emphasizing that this approach opens a window to the “reality of old age in this period.”¹²¹ However, this does not mean that all old people went through these harsh and belittling experiences, especially because only the poorest members of society looked for refuge in publicly funded hospitals.

Representation of old age virtually always depends very much on the author's, or artist's intention, and more often than not old age proved to be an easy and very welcome topic for satire, ridicule, and general comedy. This seems to be a common feature from ancient Greek drama to modern-day television shows. As Kirk Combe and Kenneth Schmader demonstrate, “Everywhere and to various degrees, elders in film, television, and advertising suffer, among others, the stigma

¹¹⁸ Martina Hartmann, *Aufbruch ins Mittelalter: Die Zeit der Merowinger* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2003), 195–98.

¹¹⁹ Fabio Giovannini, *Natalità, mortalità e demografia dell'Italia medievale sulla base dei dati archeologici* (Oxford: Hedges, 2001), 47–49. See also A. Cipriano-Bechtler, G. Grupe, and P. Schroeter, “Ageing and Life Expectancy in the Early Middle Ages,” *Homo* 46.3 (1996): 267–79.

¹²⁰ Keith Thomas, “Age and Authority,” cited by Margaret Pelling and Richard M. Smith in “Introduction,” *Life, Death and the Elderly*, ed. id. 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1994), 4.

¹²¹ Louise Gray, “The Experience of Old Age in the Narratives of the Rural Poor in Early Modern Germany,” *Power and Poverty*, 107–23; here 118.

of senility and asexuality."¹²² On the other hand, however, as they admit as well, the opposite can also be the case, which returns us to the principal intention of this volume.

Using a historical angle, focusing on the presentation of old age in medieval and early modern sources, we hope to establish a stepping stone in the comprehensive investigation of old age; this volume will hopefully shed light also on old age in our modern world, whether by contrast or by demonstrating intriguing parallels. Considering the enormous interest in geriatrics and related fields today, it seems a most appropriate step by literary scholars, historians, and art historians to offer their perspectives and discuss the complexity of old age in their sources because the cases presented there were certainly precursors to modern ones, irrespective of often vastly differing cultural contexts. After all, the hope for longevity is not a new phenomenon, as we know from the famous treatises by Luigi Cornaro (1484–1566) and Francis Bacon (1561–1626) who recommended specific life-styles and diets in order to preserve one's health and to enjoy life to the fullest extent, though with moderation and humility. Cornaro and Bacon, although they reflected Renaissance ideals, we can be certain that they simply followed numerous medieval thinkers, such as Roger Bacon and Arnold of Villanova, who advocated, by and large, the same approach to old age.¹²³

Intergenerational conflicts, physical, mental, social, and economic problems are not new to our society, though the responses by those afflicted and involved might be considerably different. With respect to classical antiquity, for instance, Moses Finley suggested: "Statistically, today as in antiquity, the agreed points at which to draw the line in general terms seem to be either sixty or sixty-five. In concrete terms, however, there are many lines, determined by social, economic, and political considerations, for which biology provides no more than crude limits."¹²⁴ This goes very much in line with R. Linton's classical formulation: "Although certain societies ease this transition [from adulthood to old age] by the formal ascription to the aged of a respect and authority greater than that accorded to full adults, it is an open question how far these formal patterns agree with the actual

¹²² Kirk Combe and Kenneth Schmader, "Naturalizing Myths or Aging: A Cautionary Tale," *Power and Poverty*, 187–205; here 198.

¹²³ Stephen Katz, "Imagining the Life-Span: From Premodern Miracles to Postmodern Fantasies," *Images of Aging*, 61–75; here 63–65; Bernd-Ulrich Hergemöller, *Die Kindlein spotten meiner schier*, 2006, 14–15. Consult Roger Bacon: *Fratris Rogeri Bacon 'De retardatione accidentium senectutis: cum aliis opusculis de rebus medicinalibus'*, ed. A. G. Little and Edward Theodore Whittington (1928; Farnborough: Gregg, 1967).

¹²⁴ Moses I. Finley, "The Elderly in Classical Antiquity," *Greece & Rome* 28 (1981): 156–71; here 156.

practice. It seems that even in the so-called gerontocracies age alone does not increase the individual's prestige."¹²⁵

Many gerontologists have been willing to investigate comparative aspects of aging and old age on a global level. There is agreement that "Culture only exists in relation to the contextual framework in which human actors find themselves,"¹²⁶ and many scholars have generally applauded this approach because it "may suggest general hypotheses about the aging experience that can be tested by employing larger samples or conducting longitudinal studies," and because it "can help us to understand in a detailed fashion how aging in the United States varies from that experienced in other places."¹²⁷ Nevertheless, gerontology has been almost exclusively concerned with the horizontal vector, and has badly ignored the vertical vector, taking us into the past, especially beyond 1800.¹²⁸ Ageism, the often prevalent stereotypical attitude against old people in modern times, deserves to be contrasted with the evaluation of old age in previous centuries and in other cultures,¹²⁹ which also would force us to reexamine the history of family within the intragenerational structures of past and present societies. Why do we seem to suffer from family atrophy today, especially in the Western world, leading to dramatic forms of ageism, when we face an exponentially growing proportion of older generations?¹³⁰

Old Age Studies, both in its modern manifestation as Gerontology, and in its historical, for instance medieval and Renaissance, dimensions require a multi-disciplinary approach, which gerontologists have recognized for a long time, though it remains to be seen whether these postulates will truly find their realization both in the academy and in practical field work.¹³¹ In fact, most recently

¹²⁵ R. Linton, "Age and Sex Categories," *American Sociological Review* 7 (1942): 589–603; here 602–03.

¹²⁶ Jay Sokolovsky, "Introduction," *The Cultural Context of Aging: Worldwide Perspectives*, ed. id. (New York, Westport, CT, and London: Bergin & Garvey, 1990), 2.

¹²⁷ Sokolovsky, "Introduction," 9.

¹²⁸ Josef Ehmer, *Sozialgeschichte des Alters* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1990); *Das Alter im Spiel der Generationen: Historische und sozialwissenschaftliche Beiträge*, ed. id. and Peter Gutschner. *Grenzenloses Österreich* (Vienna, Cologne, and Weimar: 2000); *Family History Revisited: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Richard Wall, Tamara K. Hareven, and Josef Ehmer. *The Family in Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Press, 2001).

¹²⁹ Mary E. Kite and Lisa Smith Wagner, "Attitudes Toward Older Adults," *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice Against Older Persons*, ed. Todd D. Nelson (Cambridge, MA, and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2002), 129–161.

¹³⁰ Sik Hung Ng, "Will Families Support Their Elders? Answers From Across Cultures," *Ageism*, 295–309.

¹³¹ Hain Hazam, *Old Age: Constructions and Deconstructions* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3; Stephen Katz, *Disciplining Old Age: The Formation of Gerontological Knowledge* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996); Pia C. Kontos, "Multi-Disciplinary

gerontologists such as Stephen Katz and Pia C. Kontos have warned of an emerging stalemate in the interdisciplinary approach because it has not fully developed into an intellectual framework where “plural, dislocated, interdisciplinary fragments” are continually recombined.¹³² Therefore, it would seem to be most promising both for historically oriented research on old age and for modern Gerontology to accept the challenges of medievalists and Renaissance scholars to consider the contrastive, or perhaps also parallel, images of old age as developed in the documents from the premodern era.¹³³

After all, every society and culture has to deal with representatives of all generations, including the old, and both writers and artists have regularly reflected a considerable interest in depicting old people.¹³⁴ These, however, have always been subject both to ridicule and/or praise, just as much as old age has always been regarded either with dread or with respect, with fear or with anticipation, depending on the philosophical viewpoint. “This dichotomy of praiseworthy and blameworthy character traits,” as Anouk Janssen confirms in her study on Rembrandt’s early work, “did not develop of its own accord, but is a reflection of the polarity of the *topoi*—literary conventions—on old age, which have been formulated and represented since Antiquity.”¹³⁵

As to the positive aspects, Janssen underscores, old age set the stage for spiritual growth particularly because of the physical decline because “the mind and the spirit obtain space to expand . . . physical decline is actually a precondition for the accumulation of knowledge and wisdom. And, as an added bonus, it brings relief from the disagreeable desires of the flesh.”¹³⁶ As to the negative aspects, which were particularly emphasized by Aristotle, Juvenal, and Maximian, Janssen cites: “[b]leary eyes, croaking voice, wrinkles, no teeth, stiff joints, bent shoulders,

Configurations in Gerontology,” *Ageing and Place: Perspectives, Policy, Practice*, ed. Gavin J. Andrews and Avid R. Phillips (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 24–35.

¹³² Katz, *Disciplining Old Age*, 140; id., “Critical Gerontological Theory: Intellectual Fieldwork and the Nomadic Life of Ideas,” *The Need for Theory: Critical Approaches to Social Gerontology*, ed. Simon Biggs, Ariela Lowenstein, and Jon Hendricks (Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing, 2003), 15–31; Kontos, “Multi-Disciplinary Configurations,” 35.

¹³³ See, for example, Anouk Janssen, “The Iconography of Old Age.”

¹³⁴ *Bilder vom alten Menschen in der niederländischen und deutschen Kunst 1550–1750: Ausstellung im Herzog Anton-Ulrich-Museum Braunschweig, 14. Dezember 1993 bis 20. Februar 1994*. Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Ursel Berger, Jutta Desel, Thomas Döring, Beatrice Marnetté-Kühl (Braunschweig: Herzog Anton-Ulrich-Museum, 1993); K. T. Wirag, “Cursus Aetatis: Lebensdarstellungen vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhunderts,” Ph.D. dissertation, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, 1995.

¹³⁵ Janssen, “The Iconography of Old Age,” 53. She provides a helpful overview of those voices since antiquity that praised or berated old age, and offers a rich bibliography relevant particularly for early modern art historians.

¹³⁶ Janssen, “The Iconography of Old Age,” 54.

grey hair, baldness, impotence and senility . . . the only relief is death."¹³⁷ Some scholars have indeed read medieval testimonies regarding old age as being consistently negative, though this observation might have been too deeply influenced by poetic statements in literary works such as the *Roman de la rose*. Marie Françoise Notze, for instance, claims: "la vieillesse se caractérise de façon presque toujours entièrement négative, par un ensemble de traits dont la variété se résume, en fait, aux privations essentielles qui affectaient la vieille femme représentée à l'extérieur du verger de Dédruit."¹³⁸

By contrast, Flo Keyes now suggests that the topic of the 'old man' within literary discourse has to be seen within the context of archetypal patterns: "The wise old man symbolizes meaning derived from reason; the hero has to take all of the information he has learned up to the point of the impasse, process it, and formulate a meaning for it. In most forms of romance, the wise old man is a character separate from the hero—a teacher, a mentor—but psychologically he is the hero's own higher cognitive powers, the ability to make sense of the world around him. Often the wise old man in the story does not supply the hero with direct answers but merely points him in the direction that will lead to the answers if the hero is clever enough."¹³⁹

But the same wise old man can at times also turn into an evil character because he is not only an advisor, but also a trickster. Moreover, for the intellectual maturation process of young heroes, it is often quite important that when they turn to the old counselors in time of need, those are no longer present, which forces the protagonists to confront the world by themselves; see for instance, the numerous manifestations of Merlin in Arthurian literature.¹⁴⁰

We only need to mention in passing that old people, like "Viellice," in the *Roman de la rose*, already invited medieval artists to come to terms with the challenge how to depict old age in vivid and realistic form. As Alcuin Blamires and Gail C. Holian observe regarding the illustrations in some of the *Roman de la rose* manuscripts held at the National Library of Wales, "The image of Senility forces upon our attention the erosive power of time. Her halting infirmity casts a shadow over the easy amblings of the Lover and the light steps of the dancers which are illustrated soon afterwards, and in some illuminated manuscripts Jean de Meun's creation, the Old Woman, will be found to echo Senility's gracelessness, though not her crutches. If in the narrative there is no sign that the Lover registers

¹³⁷ Janssen, "The Iconography of Old Age," 55.

¹³⁸ Marie Françoise Notz, "L'image de la vieillesse dans la poésie médiévale: Exclusion fictive et réalité poétique," *Vieillesse et vieillissement*, 227–42; here 234.

¹³⁹ Flo Keyes, *The Literature of Hope in the Middle Ages and Today: Connections in Medieval Romance, Modern Fantasy, and Science Fiction* (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland & Company, 2006), 129.

¹⁴⁰ Keyes, *The Literature of Hope*, 137.

the lesson on Time, the visual dimension helps make it unavoidable for the reader."¹⁴¹

There is no doubt that we need to analyze the relationship between aging and culture, between dying and bereavement, and between children and old parent in modern society; moreover, we are called upon to investigate intelligence and cognitive potential in old age, personality development, mental health and mental disorder of old people, and their ability to organize their own lives, to mention some of the critical issues of Gerontology.¹⁴² More important, however, might be to realize a continuous and pervasive ageism which determines contemporary culture to a considerable extent, and casts huge shadows onto the past, which have made it almost impossible to approach the topic of 'old age' from a historical, literary, and art-historical perspective.¹⁴³ Actually, the investigation of how the Middle Ages and the Renaissance viewed old age might become an effective tool in the struggle against future ageism,¹⁴⁴ although we would have to steer clear of idyllic clichés concerning the happy conditions of old people in all societies prior to the Industrial Revolution.¹⁴⁵

As much as modern scholars and writers seriously warn of underinvesting in the old and of disregarding them in favor of the idolized youth generation, and this not only for economic, social, and medical reasons, but also for psychological, philosophical, moral, and artistic reasons,¹⁴⁶ Old Age Studies suggest to turn to the representation of old people in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as a fascinating, eye-opening, and highly meaningful perspective for us today.

¹⁴¹ Alcuin Blamires and Gail. C. Holian, *The Romance of the Rose Illuminated*, 59.

¹⁴² These are some of the topics explored by modern gerontology, see, for example, *Gerontology: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. John C. Cavanaugh and Susan Krauss Whitbourne (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

¹⁴³ Erdman B. Palmore, "Cultural Sources of Ageism," *Encyclopedia of Ageism*, ed. Id., Laurence Branch, and Diana K. Harris (New York, London, and Oxford: The Haworth Pastoral Press, 2005), 93–95; John Vincent, *Old Age. Key Ideas* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁴⁴ Erdman B. Palmore, "Future of Ageism," *Encyclopedia of Ageism*, 155–58.

¹⁴⁵ See, for instance, Ernest W. Burgess, "Western European Experience in Aging as Viewed by an American," *Social Welfare of the Aging*, ed. Jerome Kaplan, Gordon J. Aldridge (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1962), 350: "In all historical societies before the Industrial Revolution, almost without exception, the aging enjoyed a favorable position. Their economic security and their social status were assured by their role and place in the extended family . . . This Golden Age of living for older persons was disturbed and undermined by the Industrial Revolution."

¹⁴⁶ Michael Jacques, *Images of Age* (Cambridge, MA: ABT Books, 1980); for modern art-historical perspectives, see W. Andrew Achenbaum, *Images of Old Age in America: 1790 to the Present*. Pictorial Research and Selection by Peggy Ann Kusnerz (Ann Arbor: Institute of Gerontology, 1978); Bettina Ullrich, *Das Alter in der Kunst: Die Darstellung des alten Menschen in der bildenden Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Altern. Bildung. Gesellschaft, 5 (Oberhausen: Athena, 1999).

Contrastive interpretations of old age then and today promise to reveal new layers of meaning of old age in terms of the history of mentality in premodern times and in postmodernity.

The testimony of a late-medieval medical writer in England demonstrates how attuned to the physical aspects of the aging body medieval learned thinkers could be and how instructive their advice regarding "tarrying the accidents of age" might be even today. Based on Roger Bacon's original Latin treatise, the author announces: "I shal steppe the doctryne the whiche man techith in tyme to be made to defende from the accidentis of age and of old men, and th'oldman from th'accidentis and decrepityte of age if thei comen bfore the tyme."¹⁴⁷ Of course, modern medical science would not pay much attention to the recommendations which culminate in the advice: "this is made and don with gladnes of songes and sight of faire and beautevous kyndly þinges and swete smellynges and comfortatief electuaries and lewke water aromatic and sum spices of sum serpentis and bathyng with fastyng stomac after the deposicioun of superfluite" (223). But we ought to take note of the great interest in helping aging old men and proffering them pragmatic solutions, written in the vernacular, hence for a wider audience.

Michael Mitterauer outlined more than twenty-four years ago what some of the central goals of historical Old Age Studies would involve. They promise to increase our awareness of cultural traditions and their impact on us today; they shed light on the current discourse on sexuality of old people by referring to the legitimization of sexuality in the past when it seems to have been more of a privilege for the young. As Robert Magnan emphasizes: "It is time that makes

¹⁴⁷ *Sex, Aging, & Death in a Medieval Compendium*, 151. In their introduction to this treatise contained in Trinity College Cambridge MS R.14.52, the editors Carol A. Everest and M. Teresa Tavormina provide the following summary of the author's general teaching about how to slow down the approach of old age: "Until optimum age, placed usually between forty and fifty years, the vital fire burns in the heart, fueled by natural fatty moisture augmented and conserved by diet and lifestyle. At the prime of life, the healthy male body comes as close as possible in this world to the perfect balance of heat and moisture. In the years of decline, however, the life-fire grows weaker, nourished by ever dwindling supplies of moisture. The body becomes cooler, causing insufficient digestion, which in turn decreases heat-sustaining fatty moisture and increases cold, harmful moisture in the form of phlegm. A cycle is thereby established wherein weaker heat leads to damaging moisture which then leads to even weaker heat. Cooled digestion also results in a reduced blood supply, contributing to, among other undesirable things, a diminution of sexual vigor. The entire spectrum of physiological changes caused by this degeneration in heat, moisture, and blood are the accidents—the preventable signs—of old age. Medieval medical theory holds that these accidents could be inhibited by replenishing the heat and moisture lost to the process of aging. Building on the understanding that restoration leads to a healthy digestion, which stimulates the production of beneficial moisture and plentiful blood, the *De retardatione accidentium senectutis* devotes most of its attention to methods, both common and arcane, which assist the augmentation of bodily heat and moisture" (135–36).

sexuality evil: senescence is a fall from courtly ideality into Christian morality."¹⁴⁸ *Humanistic gerontology*, as Laurel Porter identifies this scholarly avenue,¹⁴⁹ allows for a more contrastive analysis of modern phenomena concerning old people, many of whom have suddenly the opportunity to witness the growth even of their grandchildren into adults. Modern problems faced by old people, whether loneliness and isolation or poverty and medical issues, can be better understood if seen in contrast to past conditions, whether we think of ageism, disability, or social marginalization.¹⁵⁰ A historical perspective toward old age facilitates a critical analysis of the situation of old people also today because society is in a constant process of transformation, even if this might be predicated on a rather idealistic concept of the functionality of historical research.¹⁵¹ But one point, which Mitterauer mentions, particularly deserves to be mentioned here, the contrast between old people in modern times who "enjoy" retirement and no longer work to earn their living, versus old people in premodern times who only stopped working when their physical health failed them completely.¹⁵² This observation seems to hold true particularly for the world of farmers and craftsmen, whereas the situation seems to have been much more complex among the upper social classes, especially when we think of the rich patricians and the nobility.¹⁵³ A close analysis of the almost timeless *Apollonius of Tyre*, first composed in the fifth century, but subsequently copied, adapted, and translated into many languages, would provide numerous examples of highly respected old people, irrespective of their social status.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁸ Robert Magnan, "Sex and Senescence," 19.

¹⁴⁹ Laurel Porter, "Introduction," *Aging in Literature*, 1.

¹⁵⁰ See especially the contributions to this volume by Sarah Gordon, Sophie Bostock, and Allison Coudert.

¹⁵¹ Michael Mitterauer, "Problemfelder einer Sozialgeschichte des Alters," 15: "Die Aufgabe des Historikers, der sich mit Altenfragen beschäftigt, ist es also, aus der Analyse von Prozessen des sozialen Wandels für heutige Probleme alter Menschen zu sensibilisieren und sie besser verständlich zu machen. Auf der Basis eines so geschaffenen Problembewußtseins kann sich dann politisches und soziales Handeln sicher besser orientieren als auf der Grundlage einer reinen Gegenwartsanalyse" (The task of the historian who investigates the history of old age, consists of sensitizing us to modern problems of aging people and to improve them through the analysis of the processes of social change. Political and social actions can then certainly find a better orientation on the basis of such modeled awareness of problems than only on the basis of the analysis of the present).

¹⁵² Mitterauer, "Problemfelder," 28–29.

¹⁵³ Elaine Clark, "The Quest for Security in Medieval England," *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, 189–200; Raquel Homet, *Los viejos y la vejez en la edad media*, 121–129.

¹⁵⁴ Elizabeth Archibald, *Apollonius of Tyre: Medieval and Renaissance Themes and Variations. Including a Text and Translation of 'The Historia Apollonii Regis Tyri'* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), 123, 125, 177–79.

It would also be worth pursuing the questions regarding the relevance of menopause for older women, the significance of delivering the last child just shortly before the setting in of the menopause, and widowhood, as discussed by Mitterauer, and many other historians and scholars in the area of Women Studies.¹⁵⁵ But, without going into further details here, even in the Middle Ages, for instance, much depended on women's social status, their financial situation, and their religious-educational orientation for the proper interpretation of how many reached the stage of old age and whether they enjoyed respect and recognition.

Furthermore, as I have demonstrated above, the attitude toward old people varied greatly from one social group to another, from one literary document to another, from one cultural period to another. In fact, some of the confusion and contradictions in Georges Minois's *History of Old Age* might find their fairly simple explanation in the material itself which invited the author often to argue both ways, without ever fully comprehending the discursive nature of the topic of 'old age.' It might convince the general reader when he hears that "The unprecedented violence of attacks against old age in the sixteenth century was derived from the impotent rage of a generation which worshipped youth and beauty."¹⁵⁶ But already Bernardino of Siena (1380–1444) had warned of naive determinism and one-sidedness in the evaluation of old age, distinguishing specifically between 'bad' old people and 'good' old people in his *De calamitatibus et miseriis vitae humane et maxime senectutis*. In her discussion about his treatise, Shulamith Shahar comments: "He wrote about the good in old age, with wisdom increasing and passion subsiding, and then went on to list the manifestations of mental decline: absence of energy, forgetfulness, gullibility."¹⁵⁷ The same can be observed in the didactic poem "Daz alte swert" (The Old Sword) composed by the heretofore almost entirely overlooked fourteenth-century Alsacian-German poet Meister Altswert where Lady Venus rushes to the aged lover's support, providing him with solid arguments in favor of old age in matters of love, referring to experienced hunting animals that, though advanced in age, are always preferred by the hunters over the young dogs and birds of prey. She raises the even more troublesome question how really old people (perhaps in their sixties and above) should harbor any hope to gain love: "Solt siu dich durch din alter lan, / Wie wolt ez denn den ergan, / Die ferre für dich älter sint?" (If she [the lady] were to dismiss you because of your age, how then would those fare who are older than you?).¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Mitterauer, "Problemfelder," 29–37.

¹⁵⁶ Georges Minois, *History of Old Age*, 249.

¹⁵⁷ Shulamith Shahar, "The Middle Ages and Renaissance," 88.

¹⁵⁸ Meister Altswert, ed. W. Holland and A. Keller. Literarischer Verein in Stuttgart, XXI (Stuttgart: Bibliothek des Literarischen Vereins, 1850), p. 7, vv. 13–15; see my entry on this didactic poet in

And the sixteenth-century Italian nobleman Alvise Cornaro sang a song of praise of old age in his four *Discorsi intorno alla vita sobria*.¹⁵⁹ Again, everything depends on the context, and 'old age' indeed proves to be one of the most complex issues both in premodern studies and in modern gerontology. Woe to the old people, hail to the old people.

But the critical examination of how people in the past have viewed old age allows us to gain deeper insight into fundamental cultural concepts and practices on a local and also larger level. In other words, the examination of old age proves to be a major pathway into the history of mentality. As art history can teach us, old people were present in countless images, sculptures, and drawings throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, especially when the artist or artists intended to portray the various stages of life, such as in a diagram from the *De Lisle Psalter* (English, early fourteenth century), or in a fourteenth-century Catalan psalter.¹⁶⁰

Both contempt and ridicule of old people found vivid expression, such as in the fresco paintings of the castle of Manta in Piedmont, as well as respect and admiration for them, such as in a French miniature illustration of a sorrowful old woman or of old Adam as a peasant working the field in a fifteenth-century English stained window.¹⁶¹ Countless manuscript illustrations depicted the strong contrast between old and young people, either focusing on the shock the young experience when they encounter the old, or focusing on the respect one was supposed to demonstrate toward old people. For example, many pertinent images can be found in the extraordinary manuscript collection of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague, Netherlands. Artists throughout the Middle Ages and also, if not even more so, paid close attention to the appearance, social function, rank, and physical conditions of old people, such as Konrad Soest, Jan van Eyck, Domenico Ghirlandaio, the Master of Flémalle, Albrecht Dürer, or Vittore Capaccio and Hugo van der Goes.

Hans Memling, for instance, in a nativity scene from 1470–1472, does not hide the fact of St. Joseph's old age, in strong contrast to a really young looking Virgin Mary. His head is balding, his forehead is marked by deep wrinkles, and his entire chin area signals physical infirmity. Nevertheless, his eyes, filled with pensiveness,

Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages, ed. Robert Bjork (forthcoming).

¹⁵⁹ Shulamith Shahar, "The Middle Ages and Renaissance," 95. As Allison Coudert demonstrates in her contribution to this volume, medical science already since the early seventeenth century harbored great interest in old age because of a strong surge in optimism that human ingenuity and intelligence could effectively combat the consequences of old age.

¹⁶⁰ See the excellent illustrations accompanying Shulamit Shahar's article "The Middle Ages and Renaissance," 70, 74–75, 77.

¹⁶¹ Shahar, "The Middle Ages and Renaissance," 82–83, 85, 108. This finds solid confirmation in the contributions to this volume by Britt C. L. Rothauser, Albrecht Classen, Anouk Janssen, Sophie Bostock, and others.

are directed at the Christ child and clearly signal how much he was aware of the mysterium that had happened in this miserable shed.¹⁶² In the Wurzacher altar piece created by Hans Multscher in 1437 (Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie: "Die Geburt Christi" [Birth of Christ]) the old Joseph is portrayed in most expressive terms, kneeling behind the young Virgin, who adores the divine babe. Joseph's old age is marked by his white hair and beard, the use of a crutch, and a wrinkled face. But in the scene "Adoration of the Magi," we observe that one of the Magi is also depicted as an old man who holds the child's left hand, while Joseph, obviously irritated by the disturbance, reminds his wife that the food, which he had warmed for the child, is warm and should be fed to Jesus. In other words, for the artist it was quite normal to imagine an old man—though we can certainly not forget the trope of old Joseph—helping out in the kitchen to assist in the childcare. Moreover, in the nativity scene, a crowd of people behind a fence, who have come to watch the miracle, consists of young and old, men and women, hence representatives of the entire society.¹⁶³

Countless artists who illustrated Biblical scenes showed many of the Apostles as old men, such as in Konrad Witz's "St. Peter's Altar," today in the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva, where they can hardly pull the net with fish out of the water, whereas St. Peter is swimming, or wading, to meet Christ (John 21:1–14).¹⁶⁴ Wherever paintings or other illustrations show crowds or groups of people, the various generations come together, which allows us today to examine in great detail how old age was viewed and evaluated in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Images of older people, such as the one of Chancellor Nicolas Rolin (1376–1462), painted by Jan van Eyck in 1435 as sitting across from the Christ child, who is being held by the Virgin Mary on her lap, provided an extraordinary opportunity to delve into an individual's pensiveness, reflectivity, and melancholy, all results of their old age, especially as here the eyes of Rolin and the child meet, and the latter has raised his right hand in underscoring, as it seems, its teaching to the Chancellor, or granting him divine absolution from his sins.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² For an electronic copy of this painting, along with many other images of old people, see my collection online at: <http://www.gened.arizona.edu/aclassen/images1.htm> (last accessed on April 1, 2006). For the relationship between Joseph and Jesus, see Francis L. Filas, *Joseph and Jesus: A Theological Study of Their Relationship* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1952); André Grabar, *Christian Iconography: A Study of Its Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 130; most recently, Mary Dzon analyzed the affective relationship between father and son in her article "Joseph and the Amazing Christ-Child of Late-Medieval Legend," *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Albrecht Classen, 135–57.

¹⁶³ For illustrations and comments, see Martin Warnke, *Spätmittelalter und Frühe Neuzeit: 1400–1750. Geschichte der deutschen Kunst*, 2 (Munich: Beck, 1999), 84–87.

¹⁶⁴ Warnke, *Spätmittelalter*, 97–99.

¹⁶⁵ Although many art historians have analyzed this famous Madonna painting, the topic of 'old age'

Considering the explosive growth in percentage of an aging population all over the world for the last few decades, but especially in the western world (including Japan where the problems are particularly severe), which will have tremendous and unforeseen impacts on the economy, culture, education, technology, social conditions, communication, among many other aspects,¹⁶⁶ we would be well advised to pay close attention to the way how old people were treated in the past and in other cultures. L. A. Botelho, for instance, observes with regard to the conditions in early modern England, "The aged poor of rural, early modern England were not uniformly assigned to the fringes of the physical community and to the extremities of its affection, as were the solitary woodsmen and terrifying witches that inhabit so many fairy-tales.

The indigent elderly were very much part of the village's mental world, as well as within its physical bounds. They delivered messages, as well as babies. They nursed the sick, washed the dead, swept the church, and sometimes collected poor relief. They remained an active part of the daily give-and-take, the social exchange of village life."¹⁶⁷ It would seem that the social integration of old people within their society, providing them with meaning and purpose even at a relatively reduced rate of activities and effectiveness due to their bodies' frailty and abilities, could serve as a healthy gauge of the well-being of any social community. In this sense the study of old age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance promises to yield a rich array of important perspectives for the examination and discussion of old age both today and in the future. Nevertheless, it will remain a difficult task, as Joel T. Rosenthal has properly identified the issue at hand: "Though the progression from infancy to maturity to age might be presented with great reverence in a depiction of the Christ child, the Virgin, and St. Anne, no single model covers all the cases. If an English lord begged indulgence because he was a 'septuagenarian and a valetudinarian,' this can be countered with the majestic portrayal of the 200-year-old Charlemagne of the *Song of Roland*. In sum, it is a tale of alternatives, conflicting anecdotes, and a mixed moral . . . The problem of their

does not seem to have attracted their attention; see, for instance, *Porträt - Landschaft - Interieur: Jan van Eycks Rolin-Madonna im ästhetischen Kontext*, ed. Christiane Kruse and Felix Thürlemann. *Literatur und Anthropologie*, 4 (Tübingen: Gunter Narr, 1999). For further moral-theological interpretations of this famous painting, see Craig Harbison, *Jan van Eyck: The Play of Realism* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), 100–18. For additional examples of early-modern visual representation of old people, see the contributions to this volume by Anouk Janssen and Martha Peacock.

¹⁶⁶ John A. Vincent, *Politics, Power and Old Age*. Rethinking Ageing Series (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999); Gail Wilson, *Understanding Old Age: Critical and Global Perspectives* (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000); Terry Tirrito, *Aging in the New Millennium: A Global View* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2003).

¹⁶⁷ L. A. Botelho, *Old Age and the English Poor Law, 1500–1700* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2004), 153.

survival [of old rulers and queens], their treatment, and their grip on their place in society is a universal one; the responses of medieval society to these issues reflect the same levels of ambivalence, denial, and concern that we find in the ancient and in the modern world."¹⁶⁸

An interesting German example can be found in one of the stanzas by the Viennese didactic poet Heinrich der Teichner (fl. second half of the fourteenth century). In "Ye der man zu schaffen hat" (No. 198) he compares the lives of farmers and lords and concludes that the latter quickly grow old because of all the worries about governing their countries, defending the land and people from enemies and other dangers. Farmers, on the other hand, enjoy a simple and peaceful life: "daz dw herren wernt greis / droter denn ein pawrschaft, / daz duncht manigen wunderhaft. / daz geschiecht von unmuezz / dw ein herr leiden muez / und besorgen manigen chraiz, / daz ein pawr nicht enwaiz / der da haim ist an swaer" (many people are astonished that the lords turn grey earlier than the peasants. This is the result of the worries which a lord has to sustain because he must take care of many circles [a wide country]. A peasant knows nothing about it who stays at home without any problems).¹⁶⁹

Ideally, of course, this topic should be examined from highly interdisciplinary perspectives, including archeology, architecture, sociology, anthropology, nutritional sciences, medicine, biology, literary studies, art history, and history. Whereas such enormous cross-fertilizations will not be possible here, if they have ever been realized, this volume will bring together studies on old age as seen through the lenses of the various literatures all over Europe throughout the entire Middle Ages and the Renaissance, of art work, and historical documents. Hopefully, this introduction has at least provided some inkling of how much we all could learn about old age in the premodern era if more disciplines would be involved.

The papers assembled in this volume, carefully selected and thoroughly peer-reviewed, subsequently extensively revised by the authors, were originally presented at an international symposium held at the University of Arizona, Tucson, April 28–29, 2006, which I had organized with the financial support of the Vice President for Research, Graduate Studies, and Economic Development of the University of Arizona, Dr. Leslie Tolbert, the University of Arizona Medieval, Renaissance, and Reformation Committee (UAMARRC), the College of Humanities, the departments of Sociology, Anthropology, German Studies,

¹⁶⁸ Rosenthal, "Old Age," 2004, 432.

¹⁶⁹ *Die Gedichte Heinrichs des Teichners*, ed. Heinrich Niewöhner. Deutsche Texte des Mittelalters, XLIV (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1953), Vol. I, 221, vv. 34–41.

Russian and Slavic, and Spanish and Portuguese, all at the University of Arizona, the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies (ACMRS) at Arizona State University, Tempe, and the Arizona Senior Academy, Tucson.

The contributions promise to shed new light on this topic and will lay the foundation for a whole new brand of medieval and Renaissance scholarship dedicated to one specific aspect of the history of mentality: old age. Differently put, we are on the threshold of pursuing a new field of research, Old Age Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. I hope that this volume will serve this intended purpose, to spark new interest, to create new ideas, to develop new methodologies, new approaches, new theoretical concepts, and, above all, to initiate new scholarly synergies in the exploration of a topic that needs to be investigated from many different perspectives.

Only interdisciplinary research promises to yield the desired results concerning such a vast and highly complex aspect in the daily lives of all people throughout the ages. But each old person as depicted in stained glass windows, in manuscript illustrations, in verse romances, in chronicles, in *chansons de geste*, and in countless other literary genres, not to forget the plethora of medical, philosophical, theological, moral, and ethical treatises and related genres, requires a different set of investigative tools, and each person indicates a different range of attitudes, values, and feelings evoked from the younger generation. A fifteenth-century woodcut showing an old woman, for instance, cannot be naively interpreted as a direct reflection of social-historical reality, even though the motif chosen would certainly represent a reflection of the history of mentality.¹⁷⁰ Moreover, old people constituted a considerable percentage of medieval and early modern societies, even if they were no longer the most active and energetic members of their communities.

A comprehensive understanding of the fundamental and overarching elements characteristic of old age heavily depends on complex and diverse approaches, which this volume tries to achieve through the combination of various disciplines and historical periods. We are certainly not the first, and will certainly not be the last writers to address the topic of 'old age,' as most recent scholarly enterprises concerning Renaissance attitudes toward old age have demonstrated.¹⁷¹ And it will

¹⁷⁰ Hergemöller, *Die Kindlein spotten meiner schier*, 2006, 8–9, 93–103, seems to contradict himself by first warning the readers of the inherent problematics of a naive reading of these late medieval images, then, however, utilizing them as well without the necessary art-historical instruments of analysis and interpretation.

¹⁷¹ *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe: Cultural Representations*, ed. Erin Campbell (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006); see the review by Juanita Feros Ruys in *Parergon* and my review in *Sixteenth-Century Journal*, both forthcoming. Although the contributors discuss a wide range of topics in art history and literature, there is no cohesive conclusion and no interdisciplinary dialogue among the contributions. For old age in the early modern time period, see also Daniel Schäfer, *Alter und*

be most unlikely that the discourse offered here can, or even should, exhaust the issue. But once we understand that Old Age Studies are predicated on discourse, which is subject to constant fluctuations and modifications, then we will be much closer to grasp the actual meaning of old age in the world of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. It is not long ago that some scholars even rejected the notion that there might have been a discourse on old age prior to the age of Enlightenment and argued that medieval sources by and large ignored old people altogether.¹⁷²

Accordingly, old people might have enjoyed respect in antiquity, but they were not noticed by the public until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,¹⁷³ a concept of medieval history that we can safely disregard in light of international scholarship on the history of mentality.¹⁷⁴ By the same token, once we have developed a more in-depth understanding of old age in the past, we will be in a much better position to tackle the most difficult issue of how to approach old people in the modern world and how to handle our own old age. Just as much as in the Middle Ages and beyond, our world has to confront the question boldly and objectively, gracefully and sympathetically, how to integrate each age group into its own society, and how to provide it with meaning, relevance, direction, and purpose—which would certainly provide us with a clear measure of the degree to which we have achieved a desirable level of human civilization. Karl Mannheim had already argued forcefully that history and the historical process cannot be understood if we disregard the interaction between the generations: “Das Generationsphänomen ist eines der grundlegenden Faktoren beim Zustandekommen der historischen Dynamik. Die Erforschung des Zusammenspiels der zusammenwirkenden Kräfte ist ein Aufgabenkreis für sich, ohne dessen Klärung die Geschichte in ihrem Werden nicht endgültig erfaßt werden kann.”¹⁷⁵ (The intra-generational phenomenon is one of the fundamental factors in the establishment of historical dynamics. The exploration of the interaction among the forces connected with each other is a field of investigation that has to be understood first, otherwise the development of history cannot be comprehended fully). We hope to meet this challenge with the contributions to this volume in which ‘old age’ is identified, in a kaleidoscopic spectrum of

Krankheit in der Frühen Neuzeit: Der ärztliche Blick auf die letzte Lebensphase (Frankfurt a. M.: Campus Verlag, 2004).

¹⁷² Joachim Rohlfes, “Alt sein in historischer Perspektive,” *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht: Zeitschrift des Verbandes der Geschichtslehrer Deutschlands* 52 (2001): 388–405; here 388.

¹⁷³ Rohlfes, “Alt sein in historischer Perspektive,” 390–91, seems to disregard the Middle Ages almost deliberately, or simply passes over that period in silence. He mentions social and economic conditions in eleventh-century England once, but immediately jumps to the seventeenth century, 395.

¹⁷⁴ *Europäische Mentalitätsgeschichte*, ed. Peter Dinzelbacher, 1993.

¹⁷⁵ Mannheim, “Das Problem der Generationen,” 565.

scholarly approaches, as the focal point of a unique discourse where absolute values do not exist, whereas the playing out of radical opposites dominates the intellectual and literary game.

It might be worth noting here that the interest in Old Age Studies from a literary-historical perspective has suddenly grown on an international level. Whereas the contributions to this volume are based on papers delivered at an International Symposium at the University of Arizona, Tucson, April 27–30, 2006, only a few months later another scholarly gathering took place at the *Institut für Realienkunde des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* in Krems an der Donau, October 16–18, 2006. Those proceedings will also appear in print, offering in part different, and in part similar results. Concurrently, the Fall meeting of the *German Academy of Language and Poetry* (*Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung*), which took place in Darmstadt, October 19–21, was dedicated to the topic “Radikalität des Alters” (Radicality of Old Age), illuminating old age as a new, invigorating and liberating stage in human life beyond all traditional social constraints, pressures, and prejudices.¹⁷⁶

Before I turn over the baton to the individual contributors, I would like to offer brief but concise summaries of their findings, a critical task for every editor of such a volume.

As all contributions to this volume demonstrate, and as I have tried to illustrate in this introduction, old age is not only the last stage in human life, it is also the topic of public discourse. This discourse, however, can be traced as far back as antiquity (and further), and so it makes perfect sense to begin the collection of contributions with a study on this discourse in late antiquity. Cristiana Sogno emphasizes how much weight was placed on old age as platform for ancient rhetoric, as Cicero had already argued for. The concept of “old Roma” played a significant role and became a conceptual quarry for many late antique writers, though Lucan was the first to cast the image of an old woman to represent “old Roma.” The discursive nature of the topos of ‘old age’ becomes particularly apparent in a public speech designed as a letter by Symmachus in 384, where the old age of Roma is viewed as the embodiment of the long history and tradition of the Roman Empire and worthy of respect.

¹⁷⁶ http://www.deutscheakademie.de/druckversionen/PM_HT_2006.html (last accessed on Oct. 20, 2006). See also Pat Thane, “Social Histories of Old Age and Aging,” *Journal of Social History* (Fall 2003), calling for a greater complexity in our approach to these social-historical issues and “scepticism . . . about simplified grand narratives”; here quoted from the also available online version at: http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2005/is_1_37/ai_109668472 (last accessed on Oct. 20, 2006).

In six of his over nine hundred letters he addressed his fellow senator and poet Naucellius, who was spending his old age in a peaceful, retirement like setting in Spoleto, though he was still highly active in intellectual terms.

In his letters Symmachus draws an intriguing connection between old age and an excessive love for the archaizing style of letter writing, complementing the poet for his ability to compose in the style *senile et comicum*, in this way emulating the ancients. Old age was not a problem for Naucellius, or for Symmachus for that matter; instead it provided a topical basis for a rhetorical strategy skillfully employed by the letter writer and the poet, each in his own way and genre. Symmachus, for instance, criticized the poet, undoubtedly tongue-in-cheed, for his verbosity, allegedly typical of old people. At the same time Symmachus satirically apologized for his inability to imitate the poet's ponderous *gravitas* in his style, another feature characteristic of old age. Symmachus identified himself with *novitas* in his epistolary style, but neither the one nor the other stage in life and, respectively, in rhetoric, emerges as a true winner because, after all, as the entire correspondence reveals, old age was a complex ploy in the public discourse embraced by these two writers.

Sogno unearths in her careful analysis of these letters how much both *vetustas* and *novitas* balanced each other out in the rhetorical strategy so important for late antique epistolary literature, especially because Symmachus himself admitted at occasion how much phrases and topoi determined by the style of *gravitas* could contribute to the exploration of specific ideas and values. In letters addressed to other correspondents, the writer also emphasized the need to combine traditional, time-honored expressions and formulations with novel ideas, although he also rejected the excessive, or exclusive, use of archaisms.

This sheds important light on subsequent discussions of old age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and alerts us to the highly stylized treatment of the theme of 'old age' within the literary context. Indeed, as Sogno demonstrates, old age was not only a personal life experience, but also a mode of speech, a rhetorical strategy, a linguistic device, hence a critical instrument in the poetic, political, social, ethical, and religious discourse. This should alert us to the highly artificial and constructed nature of the literary, art-historical, philosophical, and religious treatment of old age both in late antiquity and in the subsequent periods, and probably beyond those as well.

Many times medieval poets present old figures in their narratives, but we have not made enough efforts to analyze how to evaluate them critically. In her study Britt C. L. Rothauser attempts to come to terms with the old King Hrothgar in the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*. There is no doubt that he has failed to protect his people from the attacks by the monster Grendel, and the poem makes abundantly clear that Beowulf must arrive to overcome this extraordinary challenge.

Moreover, Beowulf is the only one who can handle Grendel's mother, and he proves his heroic qualities in that situation once again. But does this mean that the passive, inert old King Hrothgar was supposed to be evaluated as an utter failure in his political and military role? Rothauser suggests a different reading by first drawing from more or less contemporary philosophical treatises that indicate how much old people were both pitied for being hampered by their aging bodies and also admired for their wisdom and experience. But by the same token the old ruler can no longer effectively defend his court and is really in need of Beowulf's help. The epic poem is simply predicated on this tragic situation, without putting any noteworthy blame on Hrothgar because of his age. On the contrary, the latter emerges as a wise, good, and prudent person, in fact as a worthy complimentary figure to Beowulf, though on a different level because they are separated by a whole generation. Indeed, Beowulf, preparing himself for his possible death in the fight against Grendel's mother, entrusts Hrothgar with the care of his thanes, thereby paying extraordinary respect to this seemingly passive and inactive king.

As Rothauser insightfully observes in the second part of her paper, focusing on the textual analysis, Hrothgar skillfully assumes the role of the publicly mourning king who publicly deplores the death of his men and hence as the one who spurs Beowulf to engage in his heroic battles. Certainly, the old king is no longer in a position to enter the fray himself, but he knows how to utilize his public speech to instill a sense of honor and bravery in his men, and especially in Beowulf, which intriguingly indicates the extent to which, at least according to this Anglo-Saxon poet, the generations are interlocked and depend on each other in respective ways. Neither youth nor old age by themselves prove to be sufficient, and a wise ruler recognizes how much both groups depend on each other. Hrothgar assumes a commanding role within this epic poem not because of any heroic acts, but because of his past achievements and his lasting legacy as a hero, effectively drawing from the charisma of the old, wise, prudent, and sage.¹⁷⁷

Moreover, as Rothauser detects, Beowulf seems to be obligated to come to Hrothgar's help, which would underscore even further the oscillating relationship between young and old within the heroic world.¹⁷⁸ Not surprisingly, both characters are bonded together through their emotional reactions to the events

¹⁷⁷ The opposite can also be observed in contemporary heroic epics and poems, such as in the Old-High German "Hildebrandslied" (written down in the early ninth century) where neither the hasty and fiery youth Hadubrand nor the bitter, prideful, worn and old Hildebrand gain the respect they desire so much for themselves. See Albrecht Classen, *Verzweiflung und Hoffnung: Die Suche nach der kommunikativen Gemeinschaft in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters*. Beihefte zur Mediaevistik, 1 (Frankfurt a. M., Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 2002), 1–52; see also his "Why Do Their Words Fail? Communicative Strategies in the *Hildebrandslied*," *Modern Philology* 93.1 (1995): 1–22.

¹⁷⁸ This can also be observed with regard to Hagen in the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied* (written down ca. 1200) and the Old Norse *Njal's Saga* (written down ca. 1280).

affecting them equally, though only the young man can take concrete actions. Hrothgar laments his inability to join the fight because of his old age, but this does not make him to an ineffective and marginalized king. Nevertheless, as Rothauser concludes, when he reflects on how much old age imposes limits on him in participating in the existential struggle, he gives finally vent to this probably common dread of old age, a time when the warrior can no longer pursue his highest goals of fighting for his people and achieving glory on the battlefield.

The study of old age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance clearly aims for the understanding of how the young generation then viewed the older generation. But questions addressing issues such as childhood, old age, love and marriage, sexuality, etc., also aim for more global perspectives pertaining to the fundamental values of any given society. Considering, for instance, how Carolingian society viewed old women, as Valerie L. Garver does in her contribution to this volume, we gain valuable insight into the whole spectrum of ethical and moral principles upholding that society altogether. Whereas previous scholarship has mostly examined the early Middle Ages through the lens of men who allegedly entirely dominated their world,¹⁷⁹ a careful analysis of the various sources (Hrabanus Maurus, Isidor of Seville, law books, hagiography, monastic rules, etc.) indicates how much information we can actually glean about old women, which is also supported by evidence accumulated by archeologists.

Most significantly, these general observations lead to rather amorphous conclusions because the various approaches to old women—as nuns in the convent, as widowed queens, as old married women, etc.—cannot be easily streamlined and categorized to give us a clear picture. In fact, as Garver discovers, early-medieval authors left numerous comments about old women that offer highly diversified perspectives, indicating that old age among women was a complex phenomenon insofar as its evaluation depended on many different social, economic, religious, and ethical factors. Widowed queens, for instance, displayed an astonishing degree of political influence, extending far beyond their limited personal realm, which radically dispels the myth of the totally subjugated woman in the Middle Ages. In the non-political arena, old widows assumed important roles as mentors, instructors, and advisors, and other old women knew how to run their own and their family's estates and were highly competent in placing their

¹⁷⁹ For important exceptions, see Martha Howell, with the collaboration of Suzanne Wemple and Denise Kaiser, "A Documented Presence: Medieval Women in Germanic Historiography," *Women in Medieval History & Historiography*, ed. Susan Mosher Stuard. Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 101–31; Jenny Jochens, *Old Norse Images of Women*. Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Lisa M. Bitel, *Women in Medieval Europe 400–1100*. Cambridge Medieval Textbooks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

children and grand-children in clerical positions of high esteem, thereby establishing stable and powerful family networks all over the Carolingian Empire.

Unfortunately, the religious and historical documents do not tell us much at all about the specific conditions under which old women died, so we mostly do not know really who took care of them and what treatment they received in their last days and hours. Nevertheless, as Garver emphasizes, the few surviving documents that shed light on the family situation pertaining to old women confirm that numerous old women enjoyed great respect and love, and hence assumed a significant role within their world during the early Middle Ages.

Whereas the topic of old age seems to be a straightforward issue in most literary documents and art-historical objects, either presenting old age in positive or negative terms, historical cases often tend to confound the simple approach to old age, revealing the individual attitudes and reasons why, when, and under what circumstances certain figures accepted standard behavioral norms of old people. When old noblemen withdrew from their public positions and withdrew into a convent or another comparable religious house, they had to consider many different, if not contradictory, criteria and carefully to balance political arguments with personal preferences. Jonathan Lyon presents such cases in his contribution, focusing, above all, on Wiprecht of Groitzsch († 1124) and Conrad of Wettin († 1157), trying to identify their motivations and practical reasons to follow this path away from their previously highly powerful stations in life.

Wiprecht was the founder of the convent of Pegau which he joined at the end of his life, and had thereby created a stable haven for himself early enough to guarantee his smooth transition into the new existence of a man removed from this world. However, as Lyon discovers on the bases of other sources, Wiprecht had played a highly active role in politics until shortly before receiving serious wounds and experiencing a rapid decline of his health. In fact, he had struggled very hard to maintain his position as margrave and yet faced considerable problems, if not utter military defeat. The decision to withdraw from the world for religious reasons then could be explained as a clever strategy to save face in the last minute, though the decline of his house soon to come was not avoidable. Wiprecht even stayed in the nearby town of Pegau instead of joining the convent because, as he claimed, he did not want to disturb the monks. In reality, it seems, he wanted to maintain close links with his political allies and to continue exerting as much power as possible.

The case of Margrave of Meissen, Conrad of Wettin, reveals a number of interesting parallels because he exerted far-reaching influence on the stage of imperial politics until 1156 when he suddenly laid down his sword, divided up his lands, and withdrew into the convent of St. Peter's on the Lauterberg, founded by Conrad's brother but strongly patronized by himself, only to die a few months

later in 1157. Significantly, shortly before his conversion Conrad seems to have faded away rapidly from the political arena under Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa and had faced a humiliating destiny as a man who had lost most of his power and influence, which seems to explain convincingly why he chose to join a convent at that point in his life, a most convenient veil to cover up his political failure. But, as Lyon correctly alerts us, the piety and sense of sinfulness determining these two figures should also not be overlooked, as all monocausal explanations for the withdrawal into the embrace of the Church in old age would be misleading. After all, both men experienced their death only shortly after their turn away from active life, which indicates, by contrast, how long they held on to their considerable political and military roles in life even up to old age.

In other words, monastic authors who discussed the decisions of old noblemen to join convents shortly before their deaths certainly reveal important, but certainly not the full range of motives by these high-ranking aristocratic individuals. The demands on these political leaders mostly prevented them from considering the well-being of their souls in the afterlife, and only in their old age, and then mostly only when they realized a major loss of their influence and power, did they had the opportunity—if they were not almost forced to—of withdrawing from this world. It was, however, as Lyon convincingly demonstrates, not a ‘retirement’ in the modern sense of the word; instead this withdrawal can be best identified as finding refuge from political disaster and also as a search for a safe haven for the Christian sinner to focus on his soul shortly before death.

Old age has always been a matter of discourse, both in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, and each writer or artist concerned with it was faced with a multiplicity of different approaches. Juanita Feros Ruys examines a wide range of classical sources first, and then turns to medieval Latin authors in a search for relevant opinions regarding old age. She investigates the possibility of detecting authentic statements in literary sources and realizes, of course, the topical nature of the theme of ‘old age’ because it was so deeply embedded in classical ancient literature (Ovid, Seneca, Cicero, etc.). One of the most dramatic examples might be *De miseria humane conditionis*, composed by Cardinal Lotario dei Segni, later to become Pope Innocent III, in 1195 when he was only 35 years of age. This was not considered to be old age even for medieval people, and particularly not for members of the Church.

In her *tour de force*, Ruys begins with Boethius’s *De consolazione philosophiae*, and then pursues a critical analysis of many other major tracts and treatises from the entire Middle Ages, extending it even into the early sixteenth century (Erasmus of Rotterdam). Other important witnesses are Maximianus, one of Boethius’s contemporaries, then Marbod of Rennes, Guibert of Nogent, Peter Abelard

(especially his *Carmen ad Astralabium*), Petrarch, and then, of course, Erasmus. Everywhere Ruys discovers specific borrowings from classical antiquity, stylized images, playful employment of rhetorical strategies, and almost a kind of masquerading in lamentations about old age and its catastrophic consequences for the human body and the human mind. Even when the personal voice determines a poetic statement, the literary tradition reveals itself, and actually quite deliberately so for artistic, philosophical, and religious reasons. When Erasmus was still very young (in his twenties), he already composed Latin elegies on old age, both reflecting, as Ruys argues, his personal melancholy, and as a demonstration of his literary training, not however, because old age had set in so early.

Nevertheless, as Ruys suggests, most of these texts were composed at times when the writers experienced a downturn in their lives and felt the need to come to terms with these sentiments. Of course, they drew heavily from classical sources and enjoined their audiences to follow a virtuous path according to well-worn theological advice from throughout time. But there still might be a possibility of discovering the individual behind tropes and topoi, otherwise there would not be a good explanation for the development of the discourse on old age in the first place on so many narrative levels throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Wherever we turn in our examination of what old age meant in antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, and how people responded to this experience late in life, we discover highly dialectical reactions and evaluations. We are dealing with a discourse, involving many different perspectives, strategies, and approaches. This is also intriguingly confirmed by Wolfram von Eschenbach in his Middle High German Grail romance, *Parzival* and in the subsequent, only fragmentary *Titirel* where the old man Titirel, the founder of the grail family, briefly appears in the narrative background and is commented on in rather contradictory fashion. Rasma Lazda-Cazers discusses Wolfram's attitude toward old age in light of theoretical approaches developed by modern gerontology and identifies the role assumed by, or rather assigned to, Titirel as that of an old man severely suffering from podagra. In particular, Lazda-Cazers questions how much medieval poets such as Wolfram were influenced by ageism, a fear, if not contempt, of old people in their physical frailty, during their own youth. She also offers the important distinction of viewing old age from within versus from without, which indicates the extent to which generational conflicts play a major role in the assessment of old age, and this also in the Middle Ages.

In *Parzival*, as Lazda-Cazers observes, the young protagonist detects his own, by then ancient grandfather in the background of the Grail court, without knowing about his identity, though he is deeply impressed by his physical beauty. At the same time the narrator relates that Titirel suffers from most painful podagra, yet

is kept alive artificially by means of the Grail so he can provide advice for the Grail community. This situation intimately connects him with King Anfortas who suffers from a wound to his testes, insofar as both men are not allowed to die and suffer permanently. At the end of *Parzival*, Titurel volunteers, by means of a messenger, the explanation why Parzival's half-brother, the heathen Feirefiz, cannot see the Grail, but then he disappears out of sight, entirely marginalized, if not eliminated, by the narrator, who probably harbored some kind of ageist prejudice despite his willingness to have Parzival describe the old man as the most beautiful one he has ever seen in his life.

The situation is very different in the fragments, *Titurel*, where Wolfram provides considerably more biographical information about the founder of the Grail family and his renown, though his time also has passed. However, in contrast to *Parzival*, here the old man has a voice on his own, though certainly elegiac in its outlook, and is greatly respected, setting the tone for the subsequent sequence of events determined by tragedy and suffering, resulting in the radical decline of an entire family. Here, as Lazda-Cazers suggests, Wolfram examined old age from within, and expressed deep sympathy with the suffering of the old man who has lost all his strength and also faces a tragic development affecting his family. In *Titurel*, then, the poet has embraced the fatality of old age as a natural part of life from within, and empathizes with the old Grail king, perhaps as a reflection of the poet's own personal experience of having grown old. In *Parzival*, by contrast, old age is viewed from without, hence treated from distance and with little concern.

In other words, Lazda-Cazers identifies fascinating literary examples where the same old figure is first marginalized and muted as an irrelevant and helpless member of the Grail society, and then, apparently at a much later stage in the poet's life, gains acknowledgment and respect as an erstwhile mighty ruler, graced by God, now facing death, and so also the death of his offsprings and their children, though there is still a sense of continuity of the family tradition and the survival of the Grail community, as far as Titurel can see it.

Many other Middle High German didactic and courtly authors were also intensively interested in the theme of old age, as Albrecht Classen's contribution illustrates. Although they never focused on old age exclusively, many of them incorporated important old figures in their romances or discussed the problems for and with old people in their treatises. Hugo von Trimberg, for instance, examined the various aspects relevant for old age in his massive didactic narrative, *Der Renner*. In general, fictional texts provided for more freedom to reflect on the dialectical approaches to old age, as the highly complex œuvre by the little known thirteenth-century poet Der (The) Stricker reveals. Particularly because he drew from many different high-medieval sources, the appearance of numerous old people in his texts clearly signals how much old age had been on the mind of his

predecessors within the German context, and how much emphasis he himself placed on this topic. But in his Arthurian romance, *Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal*, the Old Man of the Mountain is not a weak person, and outdoes everyone at court through his intellectual, perhaps magical, skills and his enormous physical prowess. The protagonist manages to defeat him only by means of counter-magic and, significantly, by an intelligent plan that forces the Old Man to realize how much he himself had been in the wrong. Old age here means nothing, except 'otherness' and difference to the world of King Arthur; it is, to be sure, not associated with physical weakness, frailty, decline of mental capabilities, and other typical features of senility. Intriguingly, in his *Karl der Große*, ultimately drawing from the Old French *Chanson de Roland*, various old advisors surface, but their old age has no bearing, as Classen discovers, on whether they play a positive or a negative role, whether they operate in the camp of the Christians or the Muslims.

This observation finds its corroboration in a number of The Stricker's short verse narratives that aim for didactic entertainment. Here again we encounter various old advisors, but old age is neither a guarantee for wisdom and virtues, nor a threat to both. On the contrary—and this can be regarded as the key component making The Stricker's works so relevant for our discussion of the topic of 'old age'—life experience does not necessarily make a good advisor. But at the same time old people cannot simply be relegated to the margins and disregarded because of their allegedly decrepit stage in life. In fact, some narratives, especially The Stricker's fables, are predicated on the idea that an evil character does not simply disappear with old age since wisdom is not necessarily associated with that time in life.

The critical issue, however, proves to be that The Stricker regularly integrates old people at all levels and in all kinds of functions in his various narratives, signaling that old age was not necessarily a hindrance or a demarcation excluding the older group within the general population from the daily events, the military operations, the political decision making process, and many other activities characteristic of the human community.

Other late medieval authors of entertaining and didactic verse narratives (*mæren*), such as Rüdiger der Hünkhover and Heinrich Kaufringer, continued to experiment with the figure of the old man, but they added strongly religious motifs. Still, they also confirmed the observation that old people continued to be integral members of their society even after they had reached a certain point in life at which the attribute 'old' suddenly applied to them. As soon as we look further into the history of German literature, and also consider courtly romances and love poetry we come across many more examples of old people, both worthy and wise, and foolish and jealous of everyone else, as Classen concludes in his study.

Contrary to modern, particularly nineteenth-century, assumptions about one of the most enigmatic figures ever created by medieval authors, Merlin, the standard characterization of this old wise wizard or enchanter by Geoffrey of Monmouth and others actually combines the features of the child and the old man, or, as Anne Berthelot calls it in her contribution, as a *puer senex*, fusing two aspects in human life that normally never meet. In the *Roman de Merlin*, the protagonist is born as a child, but experiences a tremendous growth rate and quickly impresses everyone with his extraordinary eloquence and rhetorical skills, perhaps in analogy to the Christ child. However, both in this text and in the *Historia Britannica Regum*, not to mention many other contemporary narratives, the young child Merlin is then no longer mentioned, perhaps, as Berthelot suggests, because the combination of childish appearance and old age-wisdom seemed to be too grotesque in the long run. But an extraordinarily young character, who might be Merlin, appears, for instance, in Pseudo Robert de Boron's trilogy, *Perceval*, and advises the protagonist about future events. Even though Merlin continues to be presented as a child, he is quickly accompanied by an old man, Blaise, who authenticates Merlin's vaticinations and remains the source of validation for his prophecies once he has grown up. In the *Suite du Merlin*, the contradictory nature of young-old Merlin finds astounding confirmation because at one point Merlin's prophecy is ridiculed by Arthur who believes that such a young person would not have been able to know his own father, which hence would belie the prophecy. But to Arthur's utter surprise, Merlin quickly returns, this time transfigured into an old man, thereby proving the truth of his previous statement.

In hardly any other text composed in the Middle Ages does Merlin utilize the "mask" of a child, and even here, in the *Suite du Merlin*, once he has revealed his 'truly' old age, he never resumes the character of a child again. Nevertheless, there is enough evidence to confirm that Merlin belongs to the ancient Indo-European tradition of the protean figure who combines features of childhood and old age according to the specific situation and demands, as we also learn in the Old Welsh source of Taliesin's *Mabinogion* where Merlin commands several personalities, old and young. As a protean figure, however, these personalities are only masks, and Merlin truly originates from the ancient past and only shifts his appearance to shock his environment into believing his prophecies, authenticated by his knowledge of the past. Moreover, as Berthelot emphasizes, in some cases old Merlin is shut into a kind of cage, an "*esplumeoir*," as a prisoner, such as in the prose *Perceval*, from which he later escapes, sort of being reborn as a child, rising into new life, like the Phoenix rises out of the flames. He is, to adapt Berthelot's phrase, in turn drawn from Joseph Campbell's seminal study, "a hero with a thousand faces." Only when Merlin finally abandons the protean game with ever changing personae and limits himself to the character of the old and wise man,

does the instability and fluidity of human existence come to an end and finds the Arthurian world a fixed reference system.

The value of elderly characters has never been easy to evaluate, as previous research and the many contributions to this volume indicate. Poets and writers have voiced various opinions about the utility of the aged, but any one-sided assessment of their value ignores or diminishes the complexity of the matter. To exemplify this difficult topic of the multiple roles of the wise sages throughout medieval literature, Jean E. Jost examines how representative European Grail romances in the French, German, Welsh, and English tradition viewed the function of the aged in seeking the Grail compared to the function of young protagonists. Primarily, the figure of Perceval/Parzival/Peredur/Percivale-Galahad provides a unique perspective in the dialectic and dialogue of youth and old age, for both sides need each other in order to succeed through their opposing but complementary roles. The young male protagonist constantly fails to heed the words and advice of the sages, and only when he slowly accepts their wisdom and applies it to his own life, does he gradually mature and succeed in his quest. In fact, old people throughout Grail romances, such as in Chrétien de Troyes's Perceval, provide the key to the family tradition, to collective wisdom, and to age-old experience, though they are at times not entirely free of committing errors or of miscommunicating to the younger generation. Nevertheless, as these writers consistently emphasize in their Grail stories, Perceval/Parzival/Peredur/Percivale and other youthful protagonists must learn essential lessons from these experienced sages before achieving the personal development that will ultimately move them to the final stage: assuming the throne of a healed Grail kingdom.

Although these individual romances in their own medieval languages have been discussed from multiple perspectives, Jost here offers innovative comparative perspectives evaluating the function the aged in what has previously been seen as a youthful quest; while the young knights may have physical prowess, they lack wisdom. Similarly, while the elderly possess wisdom, they lack strength and capability at this time of their lives. Success demands a mutual, cooperative endeavor, joining theory and praxis. In this collaborative process, as she demonstrates, much merit and regard is granted the experienced, especially in the Welsh *Peredur*, but also in Chrétien de Troye's *Perceval*, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and Malory's *Morte Darthur*. At every turn, mature characters emerge as the catalysts in the narrative development because of their knowledge and wisdom; they help the protagonist survive in critical moral and physical battles, and thus prepare the path to his ultimate triumph, and their salvation through it.

In Wolfram's version, as Jost underscores, the aged are of extreme importance as well, but in some situations, their advice proves appropriate and constructive, while in others, damaging and destructive. Occasionally the young man would

have been better served to pursue his own path, disregarding the sometimes contradictory lessons of conflicting ancestors. But Wolfram strikes a balance in his depiction of Parzival's development, indicating that old and young must cooperate to achieve the Grail and save the wasteland, and courtly society. Moreover, as Jost recognizes, the poet is remarkably sensitive to the characteristic features of both generations, expressing his understanding and sympathy for both, truly a sign of profound humanistic thinking.

Significantly, Thomas Malory continued this literary tradition in his "Tale of the Sankreal" by examining the conflict between generations, but assigned a more nurturing role to the elderly who help the youth grow into their social function through their shared experience. Malory did not fully differentiate between genders and, similar to his forerunners, attributed the highest authority to both older women and men. Here, they collectively contribute to Galahad's triumph and the other questors' searches. This author implies that only those beyond their sexual peak and hence sexual influence could succeed in achieving the Grail, for sexuality clouds judgment and decision-making. Thus only the elderly or chaste are regarded as trustworthy advisors leading to the path of spiritual enlightenment.

However, in all medieval Grail romances, the elderly are no longer physically powerful enough to overcome Grail hurdles, protect, and rescue their society from wasteland deterioration. Hence, young heroes must first learn the lessons of the elderly—how to succeed—and then physically execute the tasks necessary actions for salvation. Only the close cooperation of young and old, as Malory implies, can overcome past devastation and safeguard a constructive, harmonious future. Jost offers the intriguing conclusion that youthful strength and energy must be intimately interlaced with experience and wisdom to cure the illness and prior wounds of a sick society. Only in wisely curing a wounded, helpless, old king does the young protagonist find an opportunity to redeem the previous ruler and his realm, and to triumph over the challenges all society faces with his new kingship.

Old age was, as Gretchen Mieszkowski points out, a difficult time for women in the Middle Ages, both physically and in terms of how they were regarded by important men of their societies: writers, preachers, and theologians who tended to ridicule, despise, and malign them. Though the horrible witchcraze did not set in with full force until the fifteenth or early sixteenth century, extremely hostile male attitudes toward old women had their heyday long before that time and laid the foundation for the subsequent massive persecution of innocent old women, perhaps out of a deep-seated fear that they could threaten fertility.¹⁸⁰ As numerous

¹⁸⁰ See the excellent study by Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New

literary examples demonstrate, young men tended to be horrified at the physical being of old women, who are regularly described, such as in The Pseudo-Ovidian *De Vetula*, in their disgusting fleshly appearance. Mieszkowski observes that most of these old women are portrayed in literature as exceedingly poor, trying to eek out a living begging, peddling, and trapping young women for men who desire them. These ancient go-betweens, such as the almost classical old woman in *Pamphilus*, excel through their intelligence and wit and commonly prove to be masters of cunning and trickery. The *Pamphilus* Old Woman seems to have no qualms about the immorality of her trade and displays no feelings of pity for or sympathy with Galatea, the female victim of her ruthless strategies, who is brutally raped by Pamphilus as a result of the Old Woman's entrapment.

Whereas many scholars have previously discredited the reading of rape in *Pamphilus*, arguing that the intended audience, mostly cathedral schoolboys learning Latin, would have known and accepted Ovid's idea that women actually want to be forced, Mieszkowski argues that the "forcing" in *Pamphilus* far exceeds the Ovidian conception. In fact, *Pamphilus* was forbidden as reading material for boys by a fourteenth-century Oxford chancellor who had recognized the evil intent of this text. Nothing, however, stopped the enormous popularity of *Pamphilus*. Mieszkowski analyzes several other Latin comedies where old women appear on the stage (*Alda*, *Bacis et Traso*, etc.) and behave even more viciously to advance themselves. Baucis, for instance, a witch who sells women, turns into the "demonized old woman incarnate." This figure of the ancient, repulsive, evil old woman then entered thirteenth-century *fabliaux*, such as *Auberee* and *Dame Sirith*, and soon enough also other genres (Jean de Meun's part of the *Roman de la rose* and Juan Ruiz's *Libro de buen amor*). From century to century, these old women gained in intelligence, wit, and expertise in manipulating the people around them.

The Old Woman figure has long been considered primarily a literary creation. Developing a major point from her recently published book, *Medieval Go-Betweens and Chaucer's Pandarus*,¹⁸¹ Mieszkowski instead argues that, even from her first literary appearance in Latin comedy early in the twelfth century, her portrait matches old women widely condemned by theologians, preachers, and moralists. Rather than creating this figure independently, Mieszkowski claims, the literary tradition echoed and reinforced the popular tradition, yielding a society that believed old women were hateful, disgusting, and physiologically poisonous, as well as extremely dangerous. The ultimate question, then, resulting from this detailed investigation, would be why this aggression arose and intensified through time. Were these misogynist writers afraid of sexual manipulation on the part of the old women? Did these go-betweens serve as proxies for a relatively large

Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 127–59.

¹⁸¹ Gretchen Mieszkowski, *Medieval Go-Betweens and Chaucer's Pandarus*, 2006.

group of rich and powerful old widows whom the literary documents viciously targeted, only thinly veiled?¹⁸²

Fortunately, we have a wonderful opportunity to get an additional reading of some of the same text selection by Karen Pratt who pursues, however, a different and very important perspective.¹⁸³ She examines the various functions assumed by this old woman, mostly playing the role of the go-between, or matchmaker, arguing that the medieval discourse about old people allowed for more perspectives than the standard, or stereotypical, approach, and this also with regard to old women, whether some poets reflected personal contacts contrary to the highly negative, literary, figures, or whether they explored different dimensions of this discourse. First, though Pratt treats the wide range of opinions regarding old age in medieval texts, extending from contempt and ridicule to admiration and respectfulness. Philippe de Novarre, for instance, explicitly disagreed with those who despised and ridiculed people even in their middle age, not to speak of old age, emphasizing the great value and importance of old and wise councilors. Moreover, he encouraged those approaching death to prepare themselves for the afterlife, finally turning their backs on the follies of this world. The same applies to old women, and in this sense Philippe anticipated by almost two hundred years the teachings of Christine de Pizan in her *Livre des trois vertus*.

Common condemnations of old women resulted, as Pratt observes, from their alleged continued interest in sexuality far into old age, despite the loss of their physical attractiveness, resulting in the necessity for them to purchase sex. At the same time, misogynous statements were often written, as Christine underscored, by old, impotent men who ventilated their sexual frustration by vilifying supposedly nymphomaniac old women.¹⁸⁴ The literary model utilized by virtually everyone was, as Christine notes in her *Epistre*, Ovid's Dipsas in his *Amores*, an observation that easily finds its confirmation through any careful analysis of the

¹⁸² See the references to recent research on this intriguing and far-reaching topic in note 20 above.

¹⁸³ Pratt's paper was not part of the original symposium on "Old Age," and I am thankful for her willingness to add her essay to this volume. Despite some overlap with Mieskowski's paper, remarkable differences in the critical reading of the primary texts in both contributions shed important light on the discursive nature of the topic of 'old age.' Whereas Mieskowski pursues a more global discussion of her topic, Pratt concentrates on the discourse on old women in medieval French literature.

¹⁸⁴ Though not addressing old age per se, but certainly men's sexual impotence and envy of female power, fifteenth-century Poggio Bracciolini has a woman make the same observation in the *facetia* "A Woman's Witty Response." Asked by her husband about the reason why men "were more apt to solicit and pursue women rather than the other way around," she responds: "'The fact is that we are always prepared and ready for intercourse, whereas you are not. So it would be useless for us to solicit men, when they are unprepared.'" Here cited from *Eroticism and Love in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen. 5th ed. (1994; Mason, OH: Thomson Custom Publishing, 2004), 579.

respective misogynous texts. Pratt examines a selection of representative examples from the Latin comedy, *fabliaux* and Gautier d'Arras's *Eracle*, where the plotting and sophisticated old go-betweens demonstrate their outstanding skills at manipulating their contemporaries.¹⁸⁵ Here, however, the go-between assists the young man in achieving his amatory goals, which earns her a certain degree of respect from the narrator. The situation becomes more complicated with the pseudo-Ovidian work *De vetula*, spuriously attributed to Richard de Fournival, where the old woman attempts to gain sexual pleasures for herself and where both the go-between and the male protagonist are viewed rather negatively, the latter also comically.

Pratt also examines Jean LeFèvre's anti-matrimonial translation of the treatise *The Lamentations of Matheolus*, in which many of the traditional stereotypes of old women emerge again, but they lose some of their vitriolic quality as their rhetorical nature is gradually revealed. They are in fact borrowed from Latin and other sources, and are repeated by other contemporary poets, such as Jean de Meun in his part of the *Roman de la rose*, and later by François Villon. Interestingly, Pratt discovers that Jean also added some positive character traits to the figure of the old woman who, having been abused in her youth, claims that she has now acquired the wisdom necessary to advise others. Moreover, the poet places most blame for immoral behavior on the male lover, which undercuts some of Jean's most vehement anti-feminism. The same applies to Villon's description of the Belle Heaulmière, partly influenced by the negative discourse of misogyny, but partly also by sympathy for her suffering.

Pratt suggests that the tongue-in-cheek nature of most of these literary diatribes against old women means that these texts should be read ironically, particularly because the aged go-betweens display considerable intellectual sophistication and demonstrate an impressive ability to compensate for their bodily frailty with their successful strategies for assisting young people to enjoy love and sexuality. There might even be the possibility that the male poets, equally disempowered and relying only on their intellectual, learned abilities, saw themselves in the figures of the often-despised old women, the hags, who could, as in the case of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* and others, suddenly transfigure into a shining beauties.¹⁸⁶ But the only truly positive portrayal of an old woman can be found in Christine de Pizan's *Le Livre du duc des vrais amans* and her *Livre ds trois vertus*: the elderly governess Sebile de la Tour. Old age, then, as Pratt argues, was, especially in the case of old women, whose predominant role was that of sexual teacher and go-

¹⁸⁵ See also the contributions to this volume by Connie Scarborough and Gretchen Mieskowski; and the latter's *Medieval Go-Betweens*.

¹⁸⁶ Jean Jost, "Margins in Middle English Romance: Culture and Characterization in *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyne* and *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell*."

between, a matter of discourse. However, this was an ambiguous discourse, whose contrasting perspectives invited much debate.¹⁸⁷

Many scholars have focused on the most remarkable female protagonist, Celestina, in the eponymous late medieval Spanish romance (1499), but Connie L. Scarborough extends her analysis to the intriguing features of this woman as an old crone. Although Celestina closely conforms to the traditional image of an old person, she utilizes her age to her advantage to garner respect and to establish her own authority. Whenever there is a possibility to harness her old age, she displays it and evokes sympathy and pity, although on a private, personal level, Celestina suffers from the failings of her body in its old stage. The public, on the other hand, associates lechery and intelligence with her, a curious combination perhaps typical for old and single women in the late Middle Ages. Both the hair on her face and her reputation of being an alcoholic underscore these alleged characteristics. On the other hand, her old age instills others with respect for her wisdom and understanding of human affairs, making this colorful figure to a most remarkable representative of the complex discourse of old age in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It also deserves to be noticed how much Celestina knows how to utilize the rhetoric predicated on the symptoms of old age to evoke sympathy, confidence, and trust. Significantly, this strategy works exceedingly well in her efforts to achieve her goal as matchmaker, although she is clearly beyond the age of sexuality. But since she still remembers the pleasures of the flesh, Celestina seems to be trustworthy as an advisor to the young lovers, which intertwines, in a fascinating manner, old age and youth by way of focusing on the joys of the physical body. In fact, Celestina assumes the role of a *voyeuse*, whether this reflects a certain leaning toward lesbianism, or simply reveals her enjoyment of indirectly partaking in the sexual act of the young people—an act that certainly transforms the audience of this text into voyeurs as well.¹⁸⁸ By the same token, this would raise the issue whether the poet addressed a specifically old audience, utilizing the countless erotic, if not openly sexual innuendos and allusions to titillate his readers/listeners. Since Celestina is of such an age, however, she is beyond all criticism of being a lecherous, lustful person, which allows the

¹⁸⁷ See also the contribution to this volume by Harry Peters; for historical examples of old women, see the contribution to this volume by Valerie Garver; for the complex approach to old women in literary texts, see the famous example of Celestina, discussed by Connie Scarborough in her contribution to this volume.

¹⁸⁸ A. C. Spearing, *The Medieval Poet as Voyeur: Looking and Listening in Medieval Love-Narratives* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993). For modern observations regarding voyeurism, see *Die Ästhetik des Voyeur = L'esthétique du voyeur*, ed. Lydia Hartl, Yasmin Hoffmann, Walburga Hülk, and Volker Roloff. Reihe Siegen: Beiträge zur Literatur-, Sprach- und Medienwissenschaft, Bd. 147 (Heidelberg: Winter, 2003).

narrative account to heighten the erotic dimension; in other words, the screen of old age proves to be the key to licentiousness in the audience's mind.

But Scarborough also accurately observes Celestina's great fears about the failings connected with her aging body and her lack of physical and intellectual prowess, which come true, at least in one way, when this go-between runs into the wrong people and is finally killed because she does not want to share her profits of her business in erotics. Of course, the accusation that all old people are guilty of greediness ironically falls back on the two murderers as well, which deftly undermines some of the strongest stereotypes against old people. In fact, as Scarborough concludes, old age could be a most effective tool in a person's self-defense and her struggle to carve out a niche within society for herself. The fact that she is killed at the end has nothing to do with her old age, whereas her aged body allows her to operate on many different social levels and in many different social roles.

As we all know both from historical experiences and from our personal lives, social-economic, political, military, and other conditions deeply determine how any society treats its older population. The Black Death (ca. 1347–ca. 1351) was one such massive event that deeply ruptured the entire social fabric of late medieval society. This had a profound impact on the various generations, and, as a comparison of Boccaccio's *Decameron* with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* reveals, significant shifts in the treatment of old people by the young resulted. Marilyn Sandidge discusses both texts in a contrastive analysis and at first discovers a remarkable sense of nostalgia for the lost older generation in Boccaccio's tales. In fact, the plague had predominantly affected older people during those three to four terrible years, leaving the younger generation without guidance, as the literary documents testify.

Certainly, there are a number of examples in the *Decameron* where young people seriously question the authority of the older people, but they themselves are more confused and uncertain than sharply critical, or even contemptuous, of the old perhaps because the socio-cultural context in which Boccaccio composed his works was truly determined by a sense of deep crisis affecting all classes and age groups. In terms of love, the traditional conflicts between old and young men who both woo young women and so enter into dangerous competition find interesting solutions in the older generation voluntarily taking the back seat and restraining themselves in favor of the young lovers.

When parents and their children disagree regarding the potential marriage partners, they eventually tend to find a mutually satisfying solution; initial rebellion usually translates into respectful tolerance of the parent generation by their children. Sandidge suggests that the experience of the Black Death mollified the young people's desire to push the older generation aside and to assume power

themselves. The massive death toll obviously muted much aggression and political strife, and allowed the older generation to maintain their authority.

In Chaucer's world, by contrast, the appearance and role of old people evokes fear, revolt, even disgust, and opposition among the young people. Moreover, the old figures who populate the stage of the *Canterbury Tales*, have regularly reached the end of their lives and painfully await their death, disgusted with the continuity of their worldly existence. As Sandidge explains, the subsequent waves of the Black Death since the 1350s had a greater impact on the younger generation, and by the end of the fourteenth century the new imbalance in the age groups made the younger generation fearful and apprehensive of the older, leading to a new degree of hostility toward the aged and their traditional authority. In fact, Chaucer tends to portray old men as foolish and silly, as objects of ridicule by the young, especially when they pursue love among young women and do not discipline themselves, disregarding the ancient wisdom concerning old people's proper behavior. Moreover, the young characters definitely disregard the old and push them to the margin, if possible, unwilling to pay attention to their complaints and laments about their physical suffering and feeble bodies.

This does not necessarily imply that Chaucer shared this malicious attitude; instead he signals to his readers that the young figures are to be blamed in their rash and irrational behavior and in their disregard of the counsel of the old. The poet simply confirms what he observes in his world and paints a bleak picture of the new conflict between the two generations which have lost the communicative link traditionally based on respect for the old and wise in the Biblical sense of the word. Moreover, Chaucer even suggests, as Sandidge underscores, that many old people have lost their inner balance and are severely lacking in wisdom as well, inviting even further criticism by the young.

Through this approach Sandidge demonstrates how fruitful a careful combination of socio-historical, medicinal-historical, and literary-historical research can be when we focus on the study of old age in the Middle Ages. We would also have to consult numerous other sources to gain absolutely solid evidence, such as paintings, sculptures, chronicles, letters, and so forth, but the literary analysis offered here already lays the foundation and invites further investigations.

In the Middle Ages the biological concept of old age was intimately connected with an astronomical one, insofar as the four stages, or seasons, in a year were commonly paralleled with the stages of human life, as Harry Peters illustrates in his article, with winter being the time of old age and death. He emphasizes, moreover, that this concept found its analogy in the cosmic course of the planets, the sun, and the moon, predicated on a seven-stage model.

Moving from the macroscopic perspective to the microscopic, Peters also outlines how much the four humors were related to the course of the spheres, which allowed medieval poets such as Chaucer and Gower to explain the transformation of some of their characters into old people who then display typical forms of behavior, attitudes, and sentiments, such as Januarie in "The Merchant's Tale." Not surprisingly considering the allegorical nature of the figures, old Januarie marries young May, a typical narrative motif in much of medieval didactic and satirical literature, although the great age difference makes this to a misalliance both in terms of years and of humors.

Certainly, it might be too simplistic to superimpose the various models drawn from observations of nature onto literary figures where considerably more complexity rules, though not necessarily in contradiction to those models. Instead, the topic of old age proves to be of common interest for scientists, philosophers, and writers alike in the Middle Ages, who drew from each other and yet differed considerably in their evaluation and depiction of old age, as Peters demonstrates in his paper. Even astrology had an important impact on the examination of the nature and consequences of old age for the individual, as, for example, Dante's *Divina Commedia* shows, which drew, in this regard, from Ptolemy, above all. But many other poets, such as Chaucer, Jean Froissart, Christine de Pizan, and John Gower followed the same path, though they adopted the model for their individual narrative goals.

Peters impressively illustrates how much medieval literary discourses can actually be utilized for a close reading of astrological concepts concerning old age, or, all stages in human life, such as when he refers to Froissart's "dit" *Le Joli Buisson de Jeunesse*, and to Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. However, it would be erroneous to assume that the astronomical/astrological model of the stages of life always led to a negative evaluation of old age, as Jupiter was also associated with positive characteristics which young knights were supposed to imitate (Peters here refers to Dante, and so also to Christine de Pizan). The same dialectical approach can be observed with regard to Saturn, as demonstrated by various literary voices, and so also by theologians. Amazingly, as Peters convincingly documents, the scientific discourse based on the Ptolemaic world model functioned exceedingly well to provide secular and clerical writers with the necessary cosmological imagery to reflect upon the dialectical nature of old age. In this regard we begin to comprehend how much old age, as any other stage in human life, was a matter of discourse, pursued by poets, scientists, and theologians alike, which will allow us to bridge nicely the dialectical nature of the topic of old age in the Middle Ages and beyond.

Old age was not only the topic of medical, ethical, social, and economic debates in the Middle Ages, but it could also turn into a topic serving as the springboard

for discussing fundamentals of learning and even epistemology, as Daniel F. Pigg discovers in his reading of William Langland's *Piers the Plowman*. Whereas the literary figure of Will the Dreamer seems to fail in his learning process, the poet, and so the narrator, accomplishes his task and achieves his own goal of learning. Nevertheless, there are a number of indications within the narrative, especially considering the various text versions, that the ability to comprehend and to grasp the fundamental teachings of life and the soul, particularly shortly before the arrival of death. Old age, then, represents a major challenge, but Holy Church tells Will that he must primarily learn to love in order to guarantee the salvation of his soul. Death would lose all its terror if one were to know that the soul can expect to enter the Unity, or Heaven. Will is concretely confronted by the physical manifestations of old age and has to cope with the ultimate question concerning its interpretation. The recommended response consists in embracing a new type of learning, or joining in a new discourse of learning, that would overcome the threat of old age and dying, providing hope for the future in a spiritual sense.

Langland also suggests, as Pigg underscores, that Will the Dreamer has to come to terms with his own body and its sexual desires in order to fend off the consequences of old age. But the attack by Elde seems irresistible, and Will actually loses all his youthfulness, his hair, and his normal bodily strength, and above all his sexual potency. When Kit, his wife, tries to seduce him with her sexual attractiveness and to awaken his physical desires, the poem implies the dangers for the old person when neglecting the care for his soul and preparing for the afterlife. Not surprisingly, and this goes very much along with what Scott Taylor has observed in his essay regarding the teachings of Jean Gerson, Will is in need of the Holy Church in getting ready for his death. In *Piers the Plowman*, the allegorical protagonist finds refuge in a barn called Unity, which provides him with the basis for the next stages in his existence, even, if not especially, beyond his physical death.

But Will the Dreamer is not condemned to die without any hope of redemption, and without a second chance to learn the fundamental lesson of love before his death. This seems possible if Will learns a new discourse, based on Unity, and not on the Holy Church with its radical rejection of life. The reason why Will has not to abandon himself utterly to death rests, as Pigg argues, in his realistic hope to be able to learn once again, now the lessons of life, of the natural order of things, and of faith. Without being threatened by death, however, this important lesson cannot be learned. In this sense Old Age assumes a highly constructive, even positive, function because it profiles the essence of life and signals what lessons the individual has to and can learn.

How did old age figure in the world of pastoral care in the late Middle Ages? Was it considered a dreadful experience, or did the representatives of the Church

embrace it as an important stage on the path toward the soul's salvation? Scott Taylor chooses the teachings of the famous chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson (1363–1429), to probe this question further, especially because the latter's highly popular *ars moriendi* aimed at offering literary and artistic means to cope with the ultimate experience of death. However, as Philippe Ariès and others have argued, the last stage in life was commonly regarded as most dangerous for the soul because people were afraid of dying and clung to life with all their might. Only by the sixteenth century, so Ariès, new concepts of life-long spirituality came into effect and made it possible for the individual to overcome the fear of old age because of a new sense of individuality.

By examining closely Gerson's treatise *Scientia mortis* in comparison with a letter Gerson probably addressed to Philippe de Mézières, Taylor reaches a different perspective because this Parisian theologian regarded old age not as a dramatic threat; instead he proposed to treat it as an excellent opportunity for the individual to come to terms with his whole life, to reflect upon its ups and downs, and to cleanse him/herself from past sinfulness and hence to prepare for impending death. In this letter Gerson suggests that old age would be an ideal time for those advanced in years to reflect upon their lives, whether they were actually in the throes of death, or still in good health. Old age, then, was the time to withdraw from active life and to turn toward reflection and meditation, a most important activity for senectitude.

Taylor uncovers, through a careful philological analysis, heretofore ignored messages conveyed by Gerson who apparently warned his correspondent of the temptations by the devil who operated quite successfully particularly when people entered old age and were blinded in the true understanding of their life and how to prepare for death. Old people should turn, so Gerson, to prayers and reading of religious texts, instead of thinking of their past life, their youth, their family, and their wealth.

Certainly, death was not good by itself, but Gerson also did not aver to condemn it altogether; on the contrary, as Taylor emphasizes, the Chancellor advocated to utilize the time of old age for preparation of the inevitable, that is, to turn toward the spiritual and the glory of God. Those assisting people in their old age should help them to redirect their attention away from the past life toward the future life of the soul in the afterlife. Gerson espoused, as Taylor underscores, a positive, optimistic outlook toward death and encouraged his reader/s to abstain from worldly complains about the loss of physical health and material wealth. Most people, however, needed assistance in constructively handling the new experience of senectitude, as Gerson's pastoral advice indicates, encouraging the younger people to support the old and dying people in getting ready for a good death, a death within the community of the faithful. In this sense, old age proved to be an important, if not the most important, stage in life.

The relevance of our research of Old Age Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance also gains an extra momentum from the application of modern theoretical approaches to related human issues, such as Disability Studies. Sarah Gordon, for instance, offers a critical reading of early-modern French farce literature in light of the theoretical implications that can be drawn from modern Disability Studies. After all, disabilities were not uncommon in sixteenth-century France, and elsewhere in Europe, which might have considerable implications for our global investigations of old age through the lens of medieval and early-modern literature. People's reactions to features of disability then were probably not much different from those common today. Old age, however, in combination with physical disability, stigmatized individuals even further and marginalized them in a dramatic fashion. Whereas in many medieval romances and heroic epics old people are described as wise and even prophetic at times, in late-medieval *fabliaux*, and then, even more stringently, in early-modern *farce*, the opposite becomes the case. The increased number of grotesque figures on the literary stage by the sixteenth century might be a reflection of a growth in occurrence and awareness of disability among the older population, but other new conditions might also have been at play. Gordon suggests that the public might have become more aware about disabled and old people, trying to distance themselves from them, whereas in the Middle Ages society offered a considerably more integrative framework for everyone within the large family.

Examining the *farces* of *Le Ramoneur des cheminées*, *Goguelu*, and *Mimin et les deux sourds*, Gordon discovers a remarkable tendency to focus on bodily difference, fed by sentiments of fear, maybe even disgust, and alienation, and all these within a rather intimate setting of the early-modern family where power negotiations took place in which those of old age and suffering from physical disability were presented on stage as ridiculous figures who tend to cling on to their traditional power but can no longer do so in reality. But *farces* also provided theatrical space where young wives could fight against their old, disfigured, often blind husbands, enjoying an adulterous affair with a young man. And they allowed young apprentices to mock their old masters, young servants to hit their heads of the household, and other drastic conflicts to erupt which were specifically based on the age difference and often also on the suffering of the old because of their physical disability, casting the entire authority structure into a curious light.

Moreover, these *farces* also indicate, through their almost ruthless and hurtful treatment of old and disabled people as foolish, irrational, wrathful, and hot-tempered, how much the traditional power structures were falling into disarray and that the various representatives of the different generations struggled, just like the two genders, to fill an unexpected authority vacuum. By casting these old and disabled characters as central for the dramatic performance, the *farce* authors also

indicate how important they were for the public discourse of social, economic, ethical, and moral norms.

Based on a broad selection of late-medieval and early-modern Netherlandish prints, Anouk Janssen analyzes the spectrum of themes with positive and negative connotations concerning old people, demonstrating the free availability of visual motifs drawing from ancient traditions, such as the ages-of-man model. Prints experienced an enormous distribution and reflected the first modern mass media, but hardly any art historian has heretofore considered these prints within the context of Old Age Studies. Prints with motifs of old age can be divided, according to Janssen, into the two major thematic categories, those of praise and those of criticism, which can sometimes be interpreted as two consecutive phases of old age, or as two sides of the same old-age moral (within the construction of the world in reverse order or upside down). Stereotypes, prejudice, *topoi*, standard motifs, and well-established patterns emerge everywhere and expose these art works as deeply infiltrated by traditions that hark back to the Middle Ages and antiquity, though the selection analyzed by Janssen dates from the period between 1550 and 1650. By focusing on prints, which also contain numerous text passages, Janssen has chosen a most representative artistic medium that reached a wide audience throughout the Netherlands and far elsewhere.

The learned audience would have easily recognized the profound impact of the ancient tradition of stages-of-life theories according to which the images of old age conform to specific patterns and concepts, especially in light of the teachings of the four humors and their transformation in a person's old age. According to some of these theories, old age was divided into a first, positive, phase and into a last, negative, phase. Medieval science and artistic depictions here go closely hand in hand, and so it does not surprise us that many times the motifs of old age and winter, when old people suffer from the cold, are combined in one and the same scene.

Janssen also identifies the theme of 'old people badgered by young children,' or of 'young men beating their old fathers, trying to accelerate their approaching death.' But here, as she underscores, strongly satirical and ironic elements come into play, forcing us to proceed very cautiously in our interpretation of the alleged realism of these prints. However, this does not mean that artists entirely ignored the motif of 'praise of old people,' as Janssen also corroborates in her careful analysis of a representative group of prints. Likewise, the image of the old hag, usually serving as a go-between for lovers, also finds its hayday in these early-modern prints. On the other hand, in conformity with the teaching of the ancients, old age is not uncommonly identified as the time when sordid lust and sexual instincts fall away and make room for the development of wisdom—certainly a popular *topos* in literature and the visual arts, as Janssen can demonstrate through

numerous examples. Repeatedly, artists characterized old age as the time of well-deserved rest from the hustle and bustle of professional life, which could be both a topos and, as Martha Peacock argues in the subsequent paper, a reflection of reality.

It would not be possible to claim that negative traits of old age automatically dominate in the artistic reflection. Emblems, for instance, are more serious and positive about old age than single prints. Nevertheless, the negative traits consist of the motif of the loss of physical attractiveness, the transformation of the happy and youthful mind into a morose and critical personality, and the emergence of a bitter and hateful character, often accompanied by an extreme form of miserliness—a phenomenon which ancient philosophers and medical writer had already outlined in great detail. Along with this satirical criticism of ill behavior by old people, we also often come across pictorial motifs of the lecherous old man or the impotent old husband. As Janssen underlines, the early-modern Netherlandish artists obviously had been engaged in an intensive dialogue with the ancients and created their figures of old people according to many pictorial motifs which run parallel to literary models describing their old role models in the past.

Yet, how much did visual representations of old men in their foolishness, impotence, and physical frailty truly reflect social conditions? Martha Peacock examines sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Netherlandish paintings and prints dedicated to the figures of the *hoorndragers* (cuckolds) and *hennetasters* (those who groped hens because of their subjugation under their wives and/or as a form of sexual substitution/gratification)—both highly negative in their biting satire. One could analyze these images in light of artistic stereotypes, topoi, and traditional motifs, as Anouk Janssen has successfully and convincingly done in her contribution to this volume. But Peacock suggests, with equal validity and conviction, to regard them as reflections of profound social-economic changes affecting early-modern Netherlandish society. The middle class, mostly consisting of highly successful merchants, increasingly commissioned artists to portray themselves in a representative fashion, demonstrating their wealth, strength, virility, and economic prosperity, and also eulogized the Dutch military triumphs over Spain. In this context old and frail men became the object of general public contempt and ridicule, which seems to be one of the best explanations for the surprising popularity of the motifs of the *hoorndragers* and *hennetasters*. At the same time the booming industry also offered numerous opportunities for women to enter business, which foreign visitors repeatedly commented on with great amazement, especially because women had boldly assumed military roles in the Dutch revolt against the Spaniards. These women, however, also embraced the

contempt of impotent old men, which generally contributed to the growing interest in the pictorial motifs examined here.

Male audiences subscribed to them because they felt uncomfortable with the growing strength of women and so expressed considerable irritation about weak and old men who could be trampled upon by women. The images depicting weak old men thus would have to be read as dramatic examples of male viewers deeply irritated by the potential loss of their hegemony, warning their male contemporaries to prevent the decline of patriarchal rule resulting from a loss of physical strength due to old age. *Hoorn dragers* and *hennetasters* also surfaced in popular literature, such as poems, songbooks, and farces, which confirms their validity as measuring sticks of the considerable degree of insecurity on the part of the male authorities regarding the disruptions of the traditional power relationships within marriage. Significantly, this literary discourse was intimately intertwined with the visual discourse, as numerous Dutch paintings and prints from the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries indicate. The more the Dutch middle class emerged as triumphant in its effort to claim their self-determination and to free themselves from Spanish dominance, the more they also rejected the weak old man and husband who could not even control his own wife.

Although artists and poets pursued traditional motifs and intentionally worked with satirical material, its effectiveness and true purpose must also be understood in light of deeply rooted dimensions of insecurity and fear on the part of publicly very successful men, which necessitated a new marginalization of the old and decrepit, the latest challenge of 'The Other' in early-modern Europe.

Irrespective of how the public viewed old people in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, we really need to investigate how those who had reached that age—whatever it might have meant in concrete, numerical terms—evaluated senectitude and handled its challenges. Did Renaissance artists, for example, simply accept the general assumptions and retired from their career? Although the notion of 'retirement' was rather alien to that time, the example of Titian, whom Sophie Bostock studies in light of this question, illustrates powerfully how much individuals were faced by this issue and accepted the challenge. Although some contemporaries suggested to him to abstain from taking ever new commissions, Titian continued working as an artist and produced important self-portraits and an altarpiece for his own tomb in which he created the image of a dignified and respected artist in his old age. His approach obviously provided a highly influential model for generations of Venetian artists who boldly embraced old age as a significant, even beautiful stage in life. Significantly, the political hierarchy in Venice also embraced old age as a worthy time in human existence, as the election of dominantly rather old men to the post of the doge illustrates. But Bostock goes so far as to suggest that Titian himself might have introduced a new tradition

which venerated old age as a time of wisdom, artistic accomplishments, and mastery. This reevaluation of old artists seems to be closely connected with the shift in attitude toward the artists in general, regarding them as quasi-scholars of a noble status, and not as craftsmen. Of course, older artists were not expected to carry out physically demanding work, but they were highly appreciated as artists, poets, and teachers, as Raffaello Borghini suggested in his *Il Riposo* (1584). Working as designers, they could emphasize the intellectual aspect of artistic production through draughtsmanship, while the young artists/craftsmen were in charge of realizing their plans.

In fact, as Bostock observes, Titian presented himself in his self-portraits as a genius and divinely inspired artists who had gained this extraordinary rank only in his old age, identifying this time in his life as the pinnacle of his earthly existence. But the study of Titian's last self-portraits makes visible clear signs of old age, especially because the artists increasingly moved himself into the back space of his paintings, almost signaling his transition out of this life into a metaphysical sphere. This is particularly noteworthy in his third self-portrait, *Allegory of Prudence*, where Titian shows the various stages of life within one painting, himself representing old age, now overshadowed by the next generations. There are various approaches possible in interpreting the symbolism of the animal heads underneath each face, but Bostock convincingly argues that they imply the artist's desire to prepare himself for a 'good death' in the Christian context. This finds intriguing confirmation in Titian's last painting, the *Entombment of Christ* (1592) in which he presented himself as humble old man, ready to die as a good Christian, the body being already decrepit, as indicated by the torn and tattered clothing.

At each stage, to be sure, Titian insisted on the nobility of old age and boldly claimed the status of a venerated, renowned artist despite, or rather because of, his old age. He increasingly reduced the aspects of manual labor which would have been inappropriate for an old man, but he proudly retained the attributes of the wise, brilliant, and genius sage artist, even when he humbled himself in face of the crucified Christ.

Finally, taking us to the early modern age and to the emergence of modern medical sciences, Allison P. Coudert examines the attitude toward old age (not necessarily toward old people) as it developed since the seventeenth century. Situating the discourse on old age within a natural science context, she convincingly illustrates how much the scientific revolution also affected the attitude toward the aging process. In fact, many scientists experimented with new methods and medications to prevent this process or even to reverse it, which strongly suggests that old age was no longer considered a finite stage of human life. Instead, those in old age could trust modern science to help them to prolong

their life and to rejuvenate them. But this was not, as Coudert demonstrates through a broad reading of the relevant scientific literature from the seventeenth through the late eighteenth centuries, an esoteric exercise, and it did not originate in the nineteenth century, as traditional scholarship has argued repeatedly. The major reason seems to be, as Coudert's research implies, that old age was increasingly regarded no longer as an individual issue, irrelevant for society at large, but instead as a medical problem that modern science could tackle and overcome somehow or to some extent with the help of new technologies and medicine. Further, this transformed attitude was a result of a global paradigm shift away from traditional scholasticism toward modern scientific research. Until the end of the sixteenth century many alchemists, medical doctors, and others tried their luck in prolonging life, but a real breakthrough seemed to have been possible only since the seventeenth century when much new knowledge came into play and science in general experienced tremendous breakthroughs, which would entitle us to talk about a real scientific revolution.

Whereas the late Middle Ages continued to embrace deeply traditional, Christian, ideas about old age and death, that is, as a time of transition and preparation for the afterlife, helping the soul to get ready for the Day of Judgment, early modern scientist harbored very different ideas and approached old age as a challenge which their new understanding of the essence of human life, or the human body, might meet. *Memento mori* gave way to a new optimism grounded in unheard-of achievements in scientific research that promised to help old people to regain some of their strength and to recover even some of their youthfulness, such as expressed in Francis Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) and Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society* (1667), not to forget the numerous writings by René Descartes. These scholars and scientists began to treat the body not as a prison of the soul, but as a machine that could be worked with, and which had a chance of being improved, if not saved from such dreadful diseases as small pox, by human ingenuity, as the invention of inoculation illustrated. Not surprisingly, the governments and other authorities also began to collect statistical data to determine the health of their people and the percentages of the various age groups. Consequently, public and academic interests increasingly turned toward old people and the various methods to improve their lot, which ultimately led to a general change in the attitude toward them as a whole. In fact, as Coudert observes, a new fascination with and admiration of truly old people emerged since the late seventeenth century as they represented basic human hope for long life.

Certainly, as Coudert is the first to admit, medicine was still far away from achieving the success rate as is the case in our day and age, and many of the attempts to create miracle cures were based on pure fantasy and imagination, resulting in the premature death of the patients. Nevertheless, medical sciences were on the rise rather rapidly and increasingly gained in authority. This had the

positive affect for the older population that it was no longer simply pushed aside, ridiculed, or ignored, as had often, though not always, been the case in the past. There was hope in the air that the aging process could be dealt with in a constructive manner and that to grow old did no longer simply mean to get ready for death and the afterlife. In short, already early modern times witnessed the development of geriatrics, which was accompanied by a considerable increase in respect for the elderly, and all this at a much earlier stage than previously assumed.

Altogether then, Old Age Studies promise to shed important light on social, ethical, religious, moral, scientific, and cultural aspects determining both the Middle Ages and the early modern age. Both literary and art historical, both historical and scientific, both philosophical and anthropological perspectives have to be considered for a comprehensive and complex understanding of how a society regarded its older members. Only the combination of the many contributions in this volume coming from a variety of academic disciplines make it possible to comprehend truly and fully the ambivalent, often contradictory, but ultimate significant role played by old people. Each society and each culture is determined by the way how it views and treats its older population. Obviously, as the collection of these articles here demonstrates, the discourse of old age can be traced back to the early Middle Ages and has continued at least until the eighteenth century, going through many significant changes, laying the groundwork for modern gerontology, geriatrics, and Old Age Studies at large.

I would like to dedicate this volume to the memory of my parents, Anna Marie and Traugott Classen. They struggled hard throughout their lives and loved their children. I would not be what I am today without them.

Tucson, AZ, March 2007

Cristiana Sogno
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Age and Style in Late Antique Epistolography: Symmachus' Polemics against the Rhetoric of the Old¹

"*Le style c'est l'homme.*" In his lively and playful epistolary polemic concerning the appropriate style for letter writing, Symmachus established a direct link between the ripe old age of his friend Naucellius (*senectus*) and Naucellius's epistolary style in order to criticize the (excessively) archaizing way of writing (*vetustas*) that seemingly characterized the latter's correspondence. In so doing, Symmachus was following a well-established tradition in Roman rhetoric that viewed speech as a direct manifestation of character and the self,² thus presupposing "consequential continuities between the orator's own body and aesthetic theory."³

The use of age as a metaphor for style can be seen as part of the long history of the use of physical metaphors for stylistic analysis in Greco-Roman literary criticism, which rests on the "presupposition of speech as body"⁴ already found in Plato's *Phaedrus* (264c). Speech is regarded as a living organism, and its constituent parts are routinely compared to anatomical elements. Whereas anatomical imagery is often used in rhetorical treatises for structural analysis of speech,⁵ physiology is an even richer source of imagery for describing the stylistic qualities of oratory and "provides much of the figurative vocabulary applied to

¹ I would like to thank Jennifer Ebbeler (University of Texas, Austin), Noel Lenski (University of Colorado, Boulder), Neil McLynn (Corpus Christi, Oxford), and Gordon Williams (Emeritus, Yale University) for their enlightening comments and penetrating criticisms of this paper, and David Mankin (Cornell University) for his useful bibliographical suggestions. Special thanks also to Albrecht Classen for his help and for his patient editorial work. All remaining errors are, of course, mine.

² See Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, 5.47, "qualis autem homo ipse esset, talem eius esse orationem," a *sententia*, attributed to Socrates. Cf. also Seneca, *Epistulae Morales*, 114.1, "talis hominibus fuit oratio qualis vita."

³ John Dugan, "Preventing Ciceronianism: C. Licinius Calvus' Regimens for Sexual and Oratorical Self-Mastery," *Classical Philology* 96.4 (2001): 400–28; here 425.

⁴ Elaine Fantham, *Comparative Studies in Republican Latin Imagery* (University of Toronto Press, 1972), 165.

⁵ See e.g. *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 4.58, and Cicero, *De oratore*, 2.318, 2.325, and 2.358.

elocutio" (style and diction).⁶ Terms such as *sanguis* (blood), *color* (complexion), and *nervi* (sinews) figure prominently among the physiological metaphors frequently employed to describe style and diction of speech.⁷ Such words are used as symbols of health and strength (*valetudo*) in speech and are associated with the vigorous and rich style, particularly in Cicero's polemic against contemporary Atticism.⁸

The "organic" view of speech as body is consistent with the idea common in Roman rhetoric that speech and consequently oratory are subject to the aging process. This essay will analyze the use of the metaphor of age in Symmachus's discussion of epistolary style. The first section of this paper offers a brief survey of the uses of the metaphor of old age in Latin literary criticism and examines, as a case study, the striking example of the use and popularity of the metaphor of old *Roma* in the poetry, oratory, and historiography of the fourth century. The second and longer section is devoted to the correspondence of Symmachus with the poet Naucellius and analyzes the metaphorical use of age in the discussion about literary style in epistolography. By focusing on the rhetorical use of age, this essay aims at providing an indirect answer to the fundamental question addressed in this volume, that of the "presentation of old age in late antique, medieval, and early modern sources."⁹

Senectus and Vetustas

The attitude toward old age in Greco-Roman antiquity can be defined as ambiguous,¹⁰ insofar at least as one can judge from the treatises devoted to old age

⁶ Fantham, *Comparative Studies*, 166; see also 167–69, for a discussion of physiological metaphors applied to style.

⁷ The metaphorical use of very concrete physiological and anatomical terms such as *sanguis*, *nervi*, *ossa*, and *lacerti* seems typical of the Latin rhetorical tradition and has no equivalent in Greek, which tends to use more abstract terms associated with the idea of bodily health and strength. See Larue Van Hook, *The Metaphorical Terminology of Greek Rhetoric and Literary Criticism*, University of Chicago, Ph. D. dissertation 1905, 36–37.

⁸ In criticizing the "desiccated interpretation of Atticism" common among the Atticists of his time, Cicero points out the lack of blood (and, ultimately, strength) that characterizes their style (Cicero, *Brutus*, 68); cf. also Quintilian's use of the term *exsanguis* (bloodless) in his criticism of Atticism (*Institutio Oratoria*, 12.10.14). See Dugan, "Preventing Ciceronianism," 407–09.

⁹ See Albrecht Classen's introduction to this volume, 43.

¹⁰ Several collections of essays have been devoted to the study of old age in the Greco-Roman world; see *Old Age in Greek and Latin Literature*, ed. Thomas M. Falkner and Judith de Luce (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); *Perceptions of Aging in Literature: A Cross-Cultural Study*, ed. Prisca von Dorotka Bagnell and Patricia Spencer Soper (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989); *Senectus: La vecchiaia nel mondo classico*. Vol. I and II, ed. Umberto Mattioli (Bologna: Patron, 1995). More recently, see *Growing up and Growing Old in Ancient Rome: A Life Course Approach*, ed. Mary Harlow and Ray Laurence (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); Hartwin Brandt, *Wird auch*

that have survived from antiquity.¹¹ The origin of this kind of literature is usually traced back to a famous passage in Plato's *Republic* (328d–330a). On the one hand, the Platonic passage presents a strikingly positive image of old age¹² on account of the precedence given to spiritual and intellectual pleasures over the desires and impulses of the body. On the other hand, Aristotle's digression on the character of old men in the *Rhetoric* (1389b–90b) offers a more pessimistic view of old age, as shown by the long list of character flaws that are typical of old men. Such flaws are in part a direct consequence of the elderly men's experience of life, but in part also a product of physical decline.¹³

The metaphor of old age in literary criticism in antiquity is often used as a metaphor of inevitable decline. The idea is clearly expressed by Cicero in his *Tusculan Disputations* 2.5,¹⁴ where he argues that praiseworthy oratory, after reaching its peak, is destined to "grow old," as is the case for almost everything by the law of nature. The same idea is also to some degree implicit in what Cicero says in the *Brutus* when he claims that "nothing is invented and perfected at the same time"¹⁵ and illustrates this point by tracing the development in the visual arts (sculpture and painting), from the rigidity of the statues of Canachus to the 'perfect' statues of Polyclitus (the same development is seen in painting).¹⁶ Art in general seems to follow a course similar to the natural cycle of birth-growth-decline-death, as will be the case for oratory after Cicero. Interestingly, the *veteres*,

silbern mein Haar: Eine Geschichte des Alters in der Antike (Munich: Beck, 2002); Tim G. Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World: A Cultural and Social History* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003). For an assessment of Parkin's contribution, see Albrecht Classen's "Introduction" in this volume, 25.

¹¹ Old age became a popular subject of technical treatises "*peri geros*" that flourished in the Hellenistic period. For a discussion of this kind of literature, its Greek origins, and its diffusion in Rome, see Oscar Fuà, "Da Cicerone a Seneca," *Senectus* II, 183–238.

¹² Plato's positive view of old age is also reflected in Cicero's dialogue on old age (*Cato Maior. De senectute*). See Fuà, "Da Cicerone a Seneca", 183; cf. also Juanita Feros Ruys, "Medieval Latin Meditations on Old Age: Rhetoric, Autobiography, and Experience," in this volume 1–2.

¹³ Unlike young men, who are "warm-blooded," the temperament of old men is "chilly," and that renders old men prone to cowardice, because fear is "a form of chill." Not even the lack of sensual passions is seen as an entirely positive consequence of old age: because old men do not "feel their passions much," their actions are inspired "less by what they do feel than by the love of gain."

¹⁴ Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, 2.5, "Atque oratorum quidem laus ita ducta ab humili venit ad summum, ut iam, quod natura fert in omnibus fere rebus, senescat brevique tempore ad nihilum ventura videatur. For the idea of a "universal" law of inevitable decline, see Seneca, *Controversiae*, 1 praefatio 6–7, and Velleius Paterculus, 1.16–17; cf. Gordon W. Williams, *Change and Decline: Roman Literature in the Early Empire* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1978), 8–10.

¹⁵ Cicero, *Brutus*, 71, *nihil est enim simul et inventum et perfectum*.

¹⁶ Cicero's use of the evolution of Greek sculpture and painting to illustrate the evolution of rhetoric (*Brutus*, 70–71) is imitated by Quintilian (*Institutio oratoria*, 12.10.1–9). See Fantham, *Comparative Studies*, 141 and 164.

i.e., the orators of old, are less polished because they write at the time when oratory is young; a case in point is Cato the Elder whose style is too 'quaint,' and whose choice of words too 'uncouth,' simply because that was the way people spoke back then, when the art of oratory was still in its infancy.¹⁷

The ambiguous attitude of admiration for the "old" (i.e., *antiquitas/vetustas*) and criticism of that admiration is a recurring theme in literary criticism throughout antiquity.¹⁸ One need not think further than Horace's amusing polemics against the indiscriminate admiration for the poets of old and his hyperbolic complaint about the fact that a dead poet becomes automatically a good poet (Horace, *Epistulae*, 2.1.34–91). A taste for the archaic as such had grown steadily in Roman literature of the first century C.E. and culminated in the archaizing movement of the second century C.E., although not without criticism from contemporaries.¹⁹

Possibly the best example of this ambiguous attitude is the metaphor of old Roma, which seems to have been remarkably popular in the poetry, oratory, and historiography of the fourth century.²⁰ The image of old Roma is usually characterized through her physical attributes (most notably, Roma's white hair), and Roma's old age is used at times as a symbol of decline, but also as an image that should inspire respect and veneration in the audience.

The identification of the common fatherland (*patria*) with Roma first appears in Augustan poetry,²¹ but the depiction of Roma as an old woman did not occur until Lucan (1.186–92), where the great phantom of the fatherland appears to Caesar in an attempt to stop him from crossing the Rubicon.²² Roma, whom Caesar recognizes and addresses, shows signs of great emotional distress in her outward appearance and demeanor: torn hair, naked arms, and speech mingled with weeping are the external manifestations of ritual mourning and traditional symbols of deep grief.²³

¹⁷ Cicero, *Brutus*, 68, "Antiquior est huius sermo et quaedam horridiora verba. Ita enim tum loquebantur."

¹⁸ For an excellent study of the complex attitude toward *vetustas* and the relationship between past and present in Macrobius's *Saturnalia*, see Robert Kaster, "Macrobius and Servius: *Verecundia* and the Grammarians's Function," *Harvard Studies of Classical Philology* 84 (1980): 219–62.

¹⁹ Williams, *Change and Decline*, 306–12.

²⁰ According to Michael Roberts, the "topos of Roma as an old woman, corresponding to the antiquity of city and empire, finds its fullest exposition in Ammianus," who devotes a lengthy digression to it in its *Res Gestae* (Amm. 14.6.3–6). Michael Roberts, "Rome Personified, Rome Epitomized: Representations of Rome in the Poetry of the Early Fifth Century," *American Journal of Philology* 122 (2001): 533–65; here 535.

²¹ Ulriche Knoche, "Die Augusteische Ausprägung der Dea Roma," *Gymnasium* 59 (1952): 324–49.

²² See Irene Frings, "Die Klage der Roma—Lukan 1.186 ff. in der literarischen Tradition," *Eos* 83.1 (1995): 115–32.

²³ Lucan, *Pharsalia*, 1.188–90, "turrigero canos effundens vertice crines / caesarie lacera nudisque adstare lacertis / et gemitu permixta loqui" (her white hair streaming down her head crowned with towers, she stood there with mane torn and her arms bare, and mingling words and sobs in her

The prosopopoeia of an old Roma, first introduced by Lucan, was appropriated by late antique poets, and Claudian in particular seems to have been greatly fascinated by it.²⁴ On her first appearance, Roma's attire is that of a formidable warrior—a sensual blend of the goddess Minerva and an Amazon—armed with sword, helmet, and a shield richly engraved, but her display of *virtus* is balanced and softened by *decus*.²⁵ When Roma reappears in the *De bello Gildonico*, composed only four years after the panegyric, her looks are completely transformed. Claudian calls attention to the transformation of Roma by pointing out that the figure that shows up at the doorstep of Olympus is a far cry from the warrior goddess capable of imposing her laws on the Britons and subjugating the trembling Indians.²⁶ Although her attire is still that of an Amazon, Roma suffers the symptoms of a sickly and undignified old age: in addition to frail voice, slow steps, sunken eyes, withered cheeks, and emaciated arms, she can hardly carry a shield on her weak shoulder, and the helmet, too big on her shrunken head, uncovers white hair.²⁷ Moreover, she drags a spear that is stained by rust—an ingenious touch, given the fact that “Roma is very frequently represented carrying a reverse spear. It is not a far step from carrying a reversed spear to dragging it when you are tired.”²⁸ Claudian engages in *aemulatio* with his earlier panegyric for

speech). All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

²⁴ Personification of Roma is a recurring feature in Claudian's poetry, in which the goddess *Roma* appears five times as a narrative agent (see *Panegyricus dictus Probrino et Olybrio consulibus*, 75–173; *De bello Gildonico* 17–212; *In Eutropium* 1.371–513; *De consulatu Stilichonis* 2.223–407; *De sexto consulatu Honorii*, 6.356–493).

²⁵ Claudian, *Panegyricus dictus Probrino et Olybrio consulibus*, 89–95, “. . . nodus, qui sublevat ensem, / album puniceo pectus discriminat ostro. / miscetur decori virtus pulcherque severo / armatur terrore pudor, galeaeque minaci / flava cruentarum praetenditur umbra iubarum, / et formidato clipeus Titana lacessit / lumine, quem tota variarat Mulciber arte” (. . . the belt that supports her sword throws a strip of scarlet across her fair skin. She looks as good as she is fair, chaste beauty armed with awe; her threatening helm of blood-red plumes casts a dark shadow and her shield challenges the sun in its fearful brilliance, that shield which Vulcan forged with all the subtlety of his skill). Translation by Maurice Platnauer, *Claudian* (1922; Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press and W. Heinemann, 1972–1976).

²⁶ Claudian, *De bello Gildonico*, 19–20, “non solito vultu nec qualis iura Britannis / dividit aut trepidos summittit fascibus Indos” (not with such countenance does she assign laws to the Britons, or subject the frightened Indians to her rule). Translation by Platnauer, *Claudian*.

²⁷ Claudian, *De bello Gildonico*, 21–25, “vox tenuis tardique gradus oculique iacentes / interius; fugere genae; ieiuna lacertos / exedit macies umeris vix sustinet aegris / squalentem clipeum; laxata casside prodit / canitiem plenamque trahit rubiginis hastam” (Feeble her voice, slow her step, her eyes deep buried. Her cheeks were sunken and hunger had wasted her limbs. Scarcely can her weak shoulders support her unpolished shield. Her ill-fitting helmet shows her grey hairs and the spear she carries is a mass of rust). Translation by Platnauer, *Claudian*.

²⁸ Alan Cameron, *Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 274.

the consulship of Probinus and Olybrius by systematically reversing the goddess's attributes and features in the *Bellum Gildonicum*.²⁹

The depiction of Roma as an old woman and her pathetic appeal to Jupiter in the Gildonian epic is modeled on a famous passage in the equally famous *relatio* on the Altar of Victory, a speech in the form of official letter composed by Symmachus in 384.³⁰ The *relatio* was published shortly thereafter not by Symmachus but by his direct antagonist in the dispute, the bishop of Milan, Ambrose, together with the two letters that Ambrose had written to the Emperor Valentinian II in order to prevent him from yielding to the request of the Roman prefect. In the second of the letters, written after Valentinian had rejected Symmachus's petition, Ambrose had no trouble recognizing and praising the elegance of Symmachus's speech and eagerly engaged in *aemulatio* with it by introducing old Roma, this time as mouthpiece for his own arguments (*Epistulae*, 18.7).

Although there is no actual description of the physical appearance of Roma in Symmachus's *Relatio* 3, her age is alluded to in the emotionally climactic ending of her pathetic appeal to Jupiter, in which Roma complains about the attempt to remove the imperfections of old age that "comes too late and is insulting."³¹ The emphasis upon Roma's age should elicit the respect of the emperors, who are themselves *patres patriae*. Moreover, by calling attention to her longevity, Roma can look back to her long tradition and claim that the ancestral religion has enabled her to conquer the world and repulse her enemies.

This long established tradition of using age as a metaphorical framework for organizing judgments on style provides the essential context for understanding Symmachus's reflections on epistolary composition.

Age and Style in Epistolography

Of the over nine hundred letters that make up the extant correspondence of the late Roman senator Quintus Aurelius Symmachus (ca. 340–ca. 402), six are addressed to his fellow senator and poet Naucellius (Symm. *Ep.* 3.10–16).³² Apart

²⁹ Cf. Roma's luxuriant hair, threatening helmet, snow-white arms, and shining shield in the panegyric (Claudian, *Panegyricus dictus Probino et Olybrio consulibus*, 88, 90, 95–99) with her white hair, ill-fitting helmet, emaciated arms, and neglected (*squalentem*) shield in Claudian, *De bello Gildonico*, 22–25.

³⁰ As already noticed by Cameron (*Poetry and Propaganda*, 365), Roma's appeal in Claudian's *Bellum Gildonicum* is "almost certainly inspired" by Symmachus's *relatio*.

³¹ Symmachus, *Relationes*, 3.9, "Ad hoc ergo servata sum, ut longaeva reprehendar? . . . sera tamen et contumeliosa emendatio senectutis."

³² It is possible that Naucellius was the recipient also of one of the anonymous letters in the last book of Symmachus's correspondence (*Epistulae*, 9.110), and some scholars have identified the work of history that Naucellius was devoting himself to (*Epistulae*, 9.110.2, "omnem te operam condendae

from the scanty biographical information that could be gathered from Symmachus's letters, nothing was known about Naucellius until the discovery in the mid-1950s of a collection of his epigrams in a copy of a lost Latin manuscript from the library at Bobbio (*Vat. Lat.* 2836).³³ Particularly interesting in this respect is epigram 8, in which Naucellius traces a brief autobiographical sketch. From it we learn that he was born in Syracuse from Syracusan parents (*Epigr. bob.* 8.4, "et pater et genitrix larque Syracosii"),³⁴ but that he later established his residence in Rome (*Epigr. bob.* 8.9, "Iar in urbe Quirina") where he spent part of his very long life. Although there is no indication that he ever held important offices, Naucellius was a member of the Roman senatorial aristocracy, as shown by the fact that Symmachus refers to him as one of the "men of our senate" (*Symm. Ep.* 3.12.2, "viros nostrae curiae"). But, in conformity with the ideal of *otium* dear to the senatorial aristocracy,³⁵ Naucellius's epigrams offer the image of the senator spending a dignified old age in the idyllic setting of his Umbrian estate at Spoletum, where "it is pleasant to live in this way and to go through old age, pondering over the learned writings of the men of old."³⁶ Far from the cares of public office, Naucellius is able to live a peaceful life, fully engaged in intellectual activities.³⁷

historiae deputasse") with the work mentioned in *Epistulae*, 3.11.3. See Alan Cameron, "The Roman Friends of Ammianus," *Journal of Roman Studies* 54 (1964): 15–28; Sergio Roda, *Commento storico al libro IX dell'epistolario di Quinto Aurelio Simmaco*. Biblioteca di Studi Antichi, 27 (Pisa: Giardini, 1981); Andrea Pellizzari, *Commento storico al libro III dell'epistolario di Quinto Aurelio Simmaco*. Biblioteca di Studi Antichi, 81 (Pisa: Giardini, 1998). Against this hypothesis, see Jean-Pierre Callu, *Symmaque, Lettres IV (livres IX–X)* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2002), 125, with further bibliographical references.

³³ *Epigrammata Bobiensia*, ed. Franco Munari (Rome, 1955); for Naucellius's biography, see Wolfgang Speyer, *Naucellius und sein Kreis: Studien zu den Epigrammata Bobiensia*. Zetemata: Monographien zur klassischen Altertumswissenschaft, 21 (Munich: Beck 1959).

³⁴ The mention of the Sicilian origin of his family and the emphasis in the following line on the fact that he learned Latin with some difficulty (*Epigrammata bobiensia*, 8.5, "eloquium e Latio, studium non molle") seems to imply that Naucellius's first language was Greek. However, the expression might refer not to his difficulty in learning Latin, but to his efforts in composing Latin poetry, as persuasively argued by Giusto Monaco, *Scritti minori di Giusto Monaco* (Palermo: Università di Palermo, 1992), 108. For Naucellius's bilingualism, see Symmachus's mention of his translation into Latin of a Greek work on "ancient constitutions" (*Epistulae*, 3.11.3, "Non silebo alterum munus opusculi tui, quo priscas res publicas cuiusque nominis ex libro Graeco in Latium transtulisti").

³⁵ John Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court A.D. 364–425* (1975; Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 1–12; Lellia Cracco Ruggini, "Simmaco: *Otia e Negotia* di classe, fra conservazione e rinnovamento," *Colloque genevois sur Symmaque: à l'occasion du mille six centième anniversaire du conflit de l'autel de la Victoire*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, François Paschoud, et al. (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1986), 97–116.

³⁶ *Epigrammata bobiensia*, 5.5 and 7–8, "rura, domum, rigui genuinis fontibus horti . . . vivere sic placidamque iuvat proferre senectam, / docta revolvantem scripta virum veterum."

³⁷ The passage offers a neat snapshot of Naucellius engaging in philosophical pursuit by reading and meditating over the writings of the ancients, while the poem itself is evidence of his literary efforts.

The portrayal of Naucellius's old age emerging from the epigrams is remarkably consistent with the one offered in Symmachus's letters. As members of the Roman senatorial aristocracy residing in Rome, it is likely that Symmachus and Naucellius had known each other for a long time,³⁸ and the six letters surviving cannot possibly encompass their entire correspondence.³⁹ All six letters were written during Naucellius's Spoletan retreat, and three of them can be dated more precisely to the year 397 (*Ep.* 3.10, 15, and 11, probably sent in that order).⁴⁰ Notwithstanding Symmachus's repeated invitations to Naucellius to "fight against the decay of a long leisure" and go back to Rome (*Ep.* 3.12, "quin ergo eluctatus longi otii cariem Caelium nostrum revisas"), the letters are a good example of a friendship fostered through a regular epistolary exchange that revolved around common literary interests.

At the time of the correspondence, Symmachus was himself approaching *senectus*,⁴¹ but almost all of his letters put an emphasis on Naucellius's advanced age, perhaps not surprisingly given the fact that the latter lived a very long life. The Bobbio collection of epigrams indicates that Naucellius was ninety when he composed epigram nine⁴² and ninety-five when he composed epigram 8,⁴³ and it is likely that he was close to that age when he received the letters preserved in Symmachus's collection.

³⁸ Interestingly, Lucillus, the painter who executed a portrait of Naucellius when he was seventy (*Epigrammata bobiensia*, 8), is in all likelihood the same painter who decorated Symmachus's house (*Epistulae*, 9.50.1, "Quantum domui meae cultum Lucillus quondam pictor adiecerit"), and whom Symmachus recommended to Nicomachus Flavianus sr. (*Epistulae*, 2.12). Lucillus's homonymous son (*Epistulae*, 9.50.1, "huius [Lucillij filius]"), also a painter and the author of Naucellius's portrait at ninety-five, seems to be the person recommended by Symmachus to Caecilianus. It is not unlikely that Symmachus, who had recommended Lucillus to many of his "powerful friends", recommended him also to Naucellius.

³⁹ For the issue of the selection of letters for publication in the extant epistolary collection of Symmachus, see Giovanni Alberto Cecconi, *Commento storico al libro II dell'epistolario di Quinto Aurelio Simmaco*. Biblioteca di Studi Antichi 82 (Pisa and Rome: Giardini, 2002); and Cristiana Sogno, *Q. Aurelius Symmachus: A Political Biography* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 60–63.

⁴⁰ See Pellizzari, *Commento*, 84 (with bibliographical references).

⁴¹ Old age started approximately at sixty; see Moses I. Finley, "The Elderly in Classical Antiquity," *Greece and Rome* 28 (1981): 156–71. In 397 Symmachus was approximately fifty-seven years old. The rest of the letters to Naucellius (*Epistulae*, 3.12, 13, 14) were probably written at a slightly earlier time, when Naucellius's health was better. For further discussions of the various stages of age in the Middle Ages, see the contribution to this volume by Harry Peters, and as to the parallel discussion in the early modern age, see the contribution by Anouk Janssen.

⁴² *Epigrammata bobiensia*, 9.1, "Tres orbes, Saturne, tuos, pater optime vixi." In his commentary to Vergil's *Aeneid*, Servius explains that three revolutions of Saturn equal ninety years. See Servius, *In Vergili carmina commentarii*, 4.653, "nonaginta anni, hoc est tres Saturni cursus."

⁴³ The portrait that ostensibly inspired the composition of epigram 8 was painted when Naucellius was ninety five years old (*Epigrammata bobiensia* 8.8, "nona fere ac decimae dimidium decadis").

Symmachus's letters emphasize both the negative and positive aspects accompanying *senectus*. Naucellius's failing health is the (unwelcome) consequence of his age,⁴⁴ but so is his intense literary activity as translator (Symmachus, *Epistulae*, 3.11.3) and poet (Symmachus, *Epistulae*, 3.11.4). Symmachus was rather involved with Naucellius's poetic efforts and apparently helped him to organize and edit a collection of his poems.⁴⁵

What makes Symmachus's correspondence with Naucellius especially interesting from the point of view of the history of epistolary criticism is the connection drawn between Naucellius's age and his style of letter-writing. In *Epistulae* 3.15.1, Symmachus feigns concern that, notwithstanding his advancing age, he could never imitate the style *senile et comicum*⁴⁶ by which Naucellius emulates the ancients,⁴⁷ thus calling attention to the correlation between age and literary style.

This correlation is made even more evident in *Ep.* 3.11,⁴⁸ a letter that can be regarded as the *manifesto* of Symmachus's stylistic ideal of letter-writing, couched in terms of (friendly) polemic against Naucellius's own practice:

Sumpsi pariter geminas litteras tuas Nestorea, ut ita dixerim, manu scriptas, quarum sequi gravitatem laboro. Trahit enim nos usus temporis in plausibilis sermonis argutias. Quare aequus admitte linguam saeculi nostri et deese huic epistulae atticam sanitatem boni consule. Dignum est ut haec ipsa apud te culpae confessio prosit ad veniae facilitatem. Quod si novitatis impatiens es, sume de foro arbitros: mihi an tibi styli venia poscenda sit. Crede, calculos plures merebor, non aequo et bono, sed quia

⁴⁴ Naucellius is presented as being unable to undertake a trip on account of his "age and health." Symmachus, *Epistulae*, 3.16, "quia hoc [i.e. *iter*] per annos et valetudinem tuam non licet" (I gave a slave the codex with your poems to bring back to you; and, given the fact that the order of the poems is jumbled, I sent together with it the order that I suggested, so that you can make corrections to both and add the poems that you are now composing).

⁴⁵ *Epistulae*, 3.11.4, "Carminum tuorum codicem reportandum puero tradidi, et quia eglogarum confusus ordo est, quem descripsimus, simul misi, ut et correctio a te utrique praestetur et aliorum quae nunc pangis adiectio." It is possible that the collection that Symmachus helped organize comprised the poems preserved in the *Epigrammata bobiensia*. For Symmachus's own youthful poetic dabbings and overall attitude toward poetry, see Lellia Cracco Ruggini, "Simmaco e la poesia," *La poesia tardoantica: tra retorica, teologia e politica* (Messina: Università di Messina, 1984), 477–521; here 494–510.

⁴⁶ The adjective *senile* captures both the Naucellius's love for the old and the stubbornness typical of old men (see Pellizzari, *Commento storico*, 99), whereas the adjective *comicum* indicates a preference for words and expressions mined from old men in Roman comedy, more specifically, the texts of Plautus and Terence.

⁴⁷ Symmachus here is playing with the topos of *silentium*, common in epistolary exchanges. By claiming that he did not want to set a bad precedent and thus replied to Naucellius notwithstanding his stylistic 'inadequacy,' Symmachus offers a clever reply to Naucellius's complaint about *silentium*.

⁴⁸ Symmachus, *Epistulae*, 3.15.1, "Petis ut respondeam: litteris meis denuntiatio ista certaminis est. Sed unde mihi quamquam procedenti in annos graves, senile illud et comicum quo tu veteres aemularis?"

plures vitiis communibus favent. Itaque ut ipse nonnunquam praedicas, spectator veteris monetae solus supersum; caeteros delinimenta aurum capiunt. Stet igitur inter nos ista pactio: ut me quidem juvet vetustatis exemplar de autographo tuo sumere, te autem non poeniteat scriptorum meorum ferre novitatem. (*Ep.* 3.11.1-2)

[I have just received both of your two letters, written with Nestorean hand, so to speak, and am struggling to keep up with their solemn style. For today's fashion draws me to the refinement of a style likely to win applause. Therefore, be fair: accept the language of our age and put up with the fact that my letter lacks Attic strength. It is befitting that my admission of the crime to you should facilitate your pardon. But if you cannot bear novelty, take judges from the forum and ask them whether I or you should beg pardon for our style. Believe me, I will win that one, not because that is fair or proper, but because the majority tends to favor vices they share. Therefore, as you have at times recognized, I am the only one left who values the old currency,⁴⁹ everyone else is swayed by what pleases the ears. Therefore, let us make this agreement: as I surely will be glad to gather from your writings an exemplar of the old fashioned style, you should not be displeased to bear the novelty of my writings.]

By pointing out that Naucellius's letters were "written with Nestorean hand," Symmachus is playing upon two of the symbolic functions of Nestor, that of a proverbially old man⁵⁰ and that of an orator famous for his "rhetoric sweeter than honey".⁵¹ The expression *Nestorea manu* could be read as a compliment to Naucellius for the persuasiveness of his rhetoric, but the context indicates that Symmachus is (gently) poking fun at the old-fashioned and out-of-date sense of style of his correspondent. Moreover, the emphasis placed on the fact that Symmachus received not one, but two letters written by Naucellius⁵² in the same

⁴⁹ The expression "veteris monetae spectator" seems closely modeled on the expression "monetam illam veterem sectator" found in Fronto's *liber de eloquentia* addressed to Antoninus Pius; see Michael van den Hout, *M. Corneli Frontoni Epistulae* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1988) 154. The word "spectator" has here the sense of "probator," i.e., someone who not only has the competence to judge, but also approves of the old style. As for the use of "moneta" as pertaining specifically to the style of writing ("genus scribendi"), see the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* s.v. *moneta*, col. 141545. I am very grateful to Tim Moore (University of Texas, Austin) and Michael Fontaine (Cornell University) for their comments and suggestions about this difficult passage.

⁵⁰ See e.g. Symmachus, *Epistulae*, 3.13.2, where Nestor and Achilles's old tutor Phoenix are referred to as example of notoriously old, but active men.

⁵¹ Symmachus had probably in mind a passage from Cicero's dialogue on old age, in which Nestor was portrayed as a remarkably old man of ninety, whose rhetorical ability had not been impaired by age. Cicero, *Cato*, 31, "videtisne ut apud Homerum saepissime Nestor de virtutibus suis praedicet? iam enim tertiam aetatem hominum videbat nec erat ei verendum ne vera praedicans de se nimis videretur aut insolens aut loquax. Etenim ut ait Homerus 'ex eius lingua melle dulcior fluebat oratio,' quam ad suavitatem nullis egebat corporis viribus." For Symmachus's knowledge of the Ciceronian dialogue, see Wilhelm Kroll, *De Quinti Aurelii Symmachi studiis Graeci et Latinis*. Breslauer philologischen Abhandlungen, 6, 12 (Breslau: G. Köbner, 1891), 12, and 74.

⁵² In conformity with the well-worn literary topos of *silentium*, Symmachus frequently complains about the 'silence' of his correspondents and begs them to write more frequently, whereas in the case of

style seems to imply that Naucellius was affected by the long-windedness that is also a characteristic of Nestor and of old people in general, at least according to the Greco-Roman stereotype.⁵³ Symmachus was well aware of the topos of senile verbosity and used it to his advantage in chastising the self-importance reflected in the brevity of the epistles of one of his correspondents:

Soles in scribendo esse prolixus pro ingenii tui viribus. Postquam te honor aulicus in procinctum vocavit, tu quoque verba succingis . . . Quid faciam senex garrulus, cui mensura sermonis a juvene praescribitur? Trahit nos vitium senile verboritas: sed occurrit exemplum, et fastidia aurium tuarum de styli brevitate coniecto. Non enim violanda est interim mihi paginae tuae formula. Exspectabo tamen an copiam de me exigas, si plura rescripseris. Vale (Symmachus, *Epistulae*, 8.48).

[You are usually lengthy in your replies as befits your natural talent. But after your appointment at court summoned you to don the belt of office, you seem to be tightening the belt of your style as well . . . What is an old chatterbox like me supposed to do, when a youth dictates the appropriate length of his speech? Verbosity, a common disease among old men, carries me away, but your example is coming to my rescue, and from the brevity of your replies I can divine the displeasure to your ears. Therefore, I must not at present go over the limit set by the page you sent. Nevertheless, I will wait to see whether you expect longer letters from me, in case you should write lengthier replies.]

Symmachus's criticism of Maximilianus's negligence as a correspondent is expressed indirectly and ironically through the apologetic remarks about the prolixity typical of old men and through the promise to follow the example set by Maximilianus's letters.⁵⁴ There can be little doubt that Maximilianus is being

Naucellius he seems to respond to Naucellius' complaints about his own *silentium*.

⁵³ See Cicero, *Cato*, 31, where the speaker observes that Nestor is given to talking about his *virtutes* "very often" and only thanks to his remarkable eloquence is able to avoid being labeled as an "unbearable windbag" ("insolens et loquax"). For the figure of Nestor as "a paragon of senile loquacity in the *Iliad*", see Falkner, *Old Age*, 21–67; here 24; for a discussion of the characteristics of the narrative discourse of the elderly, see Nikopoulos, "Ovid on Old Age," *Mnemosyne* 56.1 (2003): 48–60; here 59.

⁵⁴ One wonders whether Symmachus had supported Maximilianus's appointment to the *honor aulicus* mentioned in the letter, which would make his remarks about the brevity of Maximilianus's letters *after* his appointment more pointed. The identity of Symmachus's correspondent is debated, but one hypothesis suggests that Maximilianus was the son of Marinianus, already a friend and correspondent of Symmachus (*Ep.* 3.23–29). On the identity of Maximilianus, see Jean Pierre Callu, *Symmaque, Lettres III (livres VI–VIII)* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1995). For Symmachus's activity as recommender, see Sergio Roda, "Polifunzionalità della lettera commendaticia: teoria e prassi nell'epistolario simmachiano," *Actes du Colloque Genevois sur Symmaque*, ed. François Paschoud (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1986), 163–76; Jennifer Ebbeler and Cristiana Sogno, "Religious Identity and the Politics of Patronage: Symmachus and Augustine," forthcoming in *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*.

chastised for his flagrant breach of epistolary etiquette⁵⁵ and repaid with the same coin until he comes to his senses, and starts writing appropriate replies.

A similar strategy is followed also in the letter addressed to Naucellius. The tone of the letter is polite and deferential, but in a light-hearted and ironic way, and the criticism of the style of his correspondent is conveyed effectively by Symmachus through double-edged compliments. Once again, Symmachus feigns an apology for his shortcomings in describing his struggle to keep up with the “solemnity” (*gravitas*) of Naucellius’s style. The term *gravitas* has an undoubtedly positive connotation and is traditionally associated with the appropriate demeanor and moral conduct expected of the Roman senatorial aristocracy.⁵⁶ As for stylistic *gravitas*, Symmachus repeatedly praises the “solemnity” of someone’s eloquence or speech,⁵⁷ but it is important to underline that the context of his praise is strictly oratorical. In an epistolary context, the excessive *gravitas* of Naucellius’s style may be regarded as inappropriate and equivalent to “heaviness” rather than “solemnity.”⁵⁸

This interpretation of the term *gravitas* as yet another instance of a double-edged compliment seems to find confirmation in what follows. Once again Symmachus adopts the ironic/apologetic strategy that best allows him to express criticism of his correspondents, be it in matters of epistolary etiquette or in matters of epistolary style.⁵⁹ But, whereas Symmachus’s apology for his supposed “senile verbosity” is ultimately a clear indictment of Maximilianus’s youthful (and arrogant) brevity, Symmachus’s criticism of Naucellius’s style is more nuanced.

Just as in the case of the letter to Maximilianus, one can detect some irony in Symmachus’s “confession of (his) crime” (“*culpae confessio*”) and his apology for being unable to keep up with Naucellius’s epistolary *gravitas*. The fact that Symmachus argues that he cannot follow Naucellius’s example, because he prefers writing in a style that would actually win the applause of the audience, undercuts the seriousness of the apology by implying that Naucellius’s writings would not.

⁵⁵ For Symmachus’s sensitivity with regards to questions of epistolary etiquette, see Michele Renee Salzman, “Symmachus and the ‘Barbarian’ Generals,” *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 55,3 (2006): 352–67.

⁵⁶ See e.g. Symmachus, *Epistulae*, 1.20.1, according to which the *morum gravitas* of the senator Vettius Agorius Praetextatus has won for him the consulship, the highest honor in a senatorial career. Cf. also Symmachus, *Epistulae*, 4.45.1, where the senate is described as “*gravissimum ordinem*.”

⁵⁷ Symmachus, *Epistulae*, 1.44.1, “*egit pater senatui gratia ea facundiae gravitate qua notus est*,” 9.72.1. “*gratulor . . . facundiae quae talium negotiorum magnitudini orationis gravitate respondit*.” The seriousness of one’s thoughts and feelings (*gravitas sensuum*) is especially appropriate in speeches (see Symmachus, *Epistulae*, 1.15.2; 1.89.1).

⁵⁸ For a discussion of the stylistic differences between oratory and epistolography, see below.

⁵⁹ There is a neat linguistic parallelism in the “apologies” that Symmachus offers to Maximilianus and to Naucellius respectively. Cf. Symmachus, *Epistulae*, 8.48.1, “*Trahit nos vitium senile verbositas*,” and 3.11.1, “*Trahit enim nos usus temporis in plausibilis sermonis argutias*.”

The (ironic) implications of Symmachus's remark become clearer when put in the context of the traditional view that "the real test of oratory is its ability to win the approval of the multitude," as indicated by Cicero in the *Brutus* (183–89).⁶⁰ The originality of Symmachus's comment resides in the fact that the same test traditionally reserved for oratory is now applied to the style of letter writing.

An interesting feature that emerges from the (admittedly one-sided)⁶¹ correspondence with Naucellius is the fact that Symmachus's criticism of Naucellius's *vetustas* is presented as a response to Naucellius's criticism of Symmachus's *novitas*. On the one hand, Symmachus seems to underscore his limitations as a letter-writer by emphasizing his inability to follow Naucellius's model, as in the case of the passage discussed above (*Epistulae*, 3.11.1). Similarly, in another letter (*Epistulae*, 3.15.1, quoted above), the simple request on the part of Naucellius for a reply is presented in Symmachus's reply as a challenge that he cannot meet.

On the other hand, Symmachus is prepared to defend his stylistic choices in letter writing. But, instead of arguing for the stylistic superiority of *novitas* when compared to Naucellius's strict adherence to *vetustas*, Symmachus reverts to the explanation of his choice in terms of the tastes of the audience. Symmachus in fact suggests that if his and Naucellius's letters were performed in the public space of the forum,⁶² and the audience was asked to cast a ballot, his stylistic choice would get the majority of the votes.⁶³ Symmachus's explanation of the choice of the audience is again very tongue-in-cheek. The argument that the audience would enjoy Symmachus's style because a) its tastes are corrupt, and b) people enjoy only what is pleasant to their ears, does not seem very serious when applied solely to style.

Criticism of the potentially corruptive power of eloquence is certainly part of contemporary rhetorical discourse in the fourth century. A good example of this

⁶⁰ Cf. Quintilian's view that the degree of eloquence is directly proportional to the extent of a speech's effectiveness upon its audience (*Inst.* 12.10.44). On this issue, see William J. Dominik, "The Style is the Man: Seneca, Tacitus, and Quintilian's Canon," *Roman Eloquence: Rhetoric in Society and Literature*, ed. William J. Dominik (London and New York: Routledge 1997), 50–68; here 63.

⁶¹ Unfortunately, the letters of Naucellius have not survived. Only very rarely did Symmachus include the letters of his correspondents, most notably in the case of his father (*Epistulae*, 1.2), and in the case of the poet Ausonius (*Epistulae*, 1.32). One might wonder, in fact, whether Naucellius's criticism of Symmachus's style was real, or whether the polemic had been 'staged' by Symmachus (with or without the complicity of Naucellius) in order to promote his ideal of epistolary style. After all, the letters addressed to Naucellius that were included in Symmachus's correspondence date to the period (late 390s) when Symmachus was starting to organize his correspondence for publication.

⁶² The mention of the forum in Symmachus's letter suggests the connection between oratorical and epistolary eloquence.

⁶³ The audience supposedly would have to decide who between Symmachus and Naucellius should apologize for his stylistic choice — a choice consistent with the ironic tone that pervades the letter.

can be seen in the second of Ambrose's letters against Symmachus's famous petition for the restoration of the Altar of Victory,⁶⁴ where the bishop warns the reader at length against the dangerous power of rhetoric and the dazzling beauty of words that are devoid of truth and emphasizes by contrast the truthfulness inherent in his speech and its (supposed) lack of rhetorical artistry. Ambrose's message is loud and clear: truth does not need to be embellished.

However, there is a fundamental difference between arguing against the corruptive power of a rhetoric formally appealing, but false in content, as in the case of Ambrose's letter, and pointing out that people appreciate what is "soothing to their ears" ("delinimenta aurium"). There is nothing wrong with a rhetoric esthetically pleasing to the audience if the content is not an issue.

But, notwithstanding his defense of *novitas*, Symmachus does not reject entirely Naucellius's *vetustas*. When he invites Naucellius to accept "the language of his time"⁶⁵ and asks Naucellius to put up with the fact that his (i.e., Symmachus's) letter lacks "Attic strength" ("atticam sanitatem"),⁶⁶ Symmachus pays homage to Naucellius's love of *vetustas* by using the old-fashioned expression *boni consule*.⁶⁷ Symmachus also points out that he is apparently one of the few who can appreciate *vetustas*, as Naucellius himself is fond of repeating. Given the generally ironic tone of the letter, the remark could be read as implying that Naucellius's stylistic choice is so painfully out-of-fashion that almost none of his contemporaries can stomach it. But a closer look at his correspondence shows that Symmachus is not in fact entirely opposed to a (moderate) use of *vetustas* in letter-writing. In fact, the use of "old-fashioned words" ("verborum vetustas") coupled with "the novelty of thoughts and feelings" ("sensuum novitas") is something to

⁶⁴ Ambrose, *Epistulae*, 18.2.

⁶⁵ Symmachus's polemic against Naucellius's epistolary style seems to borrow the language used by Cicero in his polemic against contemporary Atticism. Cf. Symmachus's preference for the "refinement of a speech likely to win applause" ("in plausibilis sermonis argutias") and Cicero, *Brutus*, 167, "huius orationes tantum argutiarum tantum exemplorum tantum urbanitatis habent, ut paene Attico stilo scriptae esse videantur."

⁶⁶ The mention of "Attic strength" echoes the language used by Cicero in describing the healthy vigor of Greek Atticism in contrast with the weakening health of the Atticist movement of his own time (Cicero, *Brutus*, 51, "nam ut semel e Piraeo eloquentia evecta est, omnis peragravit insulas atque ita peregrinata tota Asia est, ut se externis oblineret moribus omnemque illam salubritatem Atticae dictionis et quasi sanitatem perderet ac loqui paene dediceret"). See Dugan, "Preventing Ciceronianism," 408.

⁶⁷ However old-fashioned, the expression *boni consule* is nonetheless commonly used, which seems to indicate that Symmachus is not entirely against *vetustas*, but opposes an excessive and indiscriminate use of archaisms. See Gerd Haverling, *Studies on Symmachus's Language and Style* (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1988), 200.

be sought and praised in letter-writing, as shown by an exquisitely literary letter addressed to his fellow senator and political ally Vettius Agorius Praetextatus.⁶⁸

As in the case of Naucellius, Praetextatus was actively engaged in the pursuit of literary *otium*, when he received Symmachus's letter. Notwithstanding the fact that, in his letter to Symmachus, Praetextatus had supposedly jokingly bragged that he was spending his time away from public office in the (mindless) pursuit of hunting,⁶⁹ the quality of his (lost) letter to Symmachus is taken as evidence of the depth of his literary studies and pursuit.⁷⁰

Also indicative of Symmachus's stylistic ideal of letter writing and, specifically, of his attitude toward the use of stylistic *vetustas* in epistolography is a letter addressed to his son Memmius. The letter to Memmius offers an interesting parallel to the letter to Naucellius insofar as it draws a connection between age and style:

Scintillare acuminibus atque sentiis epistolas tuas gaudeo; decet enim loqui exsultantius juvenilem calorem. Sed volo ut in aliis materiis aculeis orationis utaris, huic autem generi scriptionis maturum aliquid et comicum misceas: quod tibi et rhetorem tuum credo praecipere. Nam ut in vestitu hominum, caeteroque vitae cultu, loco ac tempori apta sumuntur, ita ingeniorum varietas in familiaribus scriptis negligentiam quamdam debet imitari, in forensibus vero quater arma facundiae. (Symm. *Ep.* 7.9.1)

[I am delighted that your letters sparkle with the sharpness of your *sententiae*, for it befits the ardor of youth to speak rather exuberantly. But I wish that you would reserve the barbs of oratory for other matters and instead mix into this genre of writing (i.e. epistolography) some old-fashioned and comic elements: I believe in fact that your teacher of rhetoric also gives you the same advice. For as with the style of dressing and in all other refinements of life, people choose what is appropriate to the place and time, in the same way a multi-faceted talent must imitate a certain nonchalance in letter-

⁶⁸ See Symmachus, *Epistulae*, 1.53, "Nam unde est haec in epistolis tuis sensuum novitas, verborum vetustas?"; cf. also the letter addressed to Gregorius (*Epistulae*, 3.22.1, "Quae enim pars litterarum tuarum vel inventionum prudentia caruit vel novitate sensuum, vel antiquitate verborum?")

⁶⁹ Symmachus, *Epistulae*, 1.53.1, "Otio venatibus gloriare." For hunting as the aristocratic leisurely sport par excellence and as literary topos in epistolography, see Pliny's letter to Tacitus (*Epistulae*, 1.6), Adrian N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), 99–101 and 488–89. For the praise of country life in general as the nursery of philosophy, see Horace, *Sermones*, 2.6.60–74. On the connection between hunting and literature in the correspondence of Pliny, Fronto, and Symmachus, see Philippe Bruggisser, *Symmaque ou le rituel épistolaire de l'amitié littéraire. Recherches sur le premier livre de la correspondance* (Fribourg, CH: Editions Universitaires, 1993), 397.

⁷⁰ Unless of course Praetextatus, like Hesiodus, met Apollo in the woods! See Symmachus, *Epistulae*, 1.53.1, "Nisi forte in sylvis Apollinem continuaris, ut ille pastor Hesiodius, quem poetica lauro Camoenalis familia coronavit . . . Quare cum scribis, memento facundiae tuae modum ponere. Rustica sint et inculata, quae loqueris, ut venator esse credaris."

writing, whereas it should brandish the weapons of eloquence in matters pertaining to oratory.]

Symmachus praises the (lost) letters that he received from his son for their stylistic brilliance and acknowledges that the exuberance of expression is appropriate for a young man. But at the same time, he encourages his son to “mix *also* some old-fashioned and comic elements” in his letters, because the stylistic requirements of epistolography are different from those of oratory, and letter-writing calls for a carefully studied “shabbiness” that should differ greatly from the pyrotechnical eloquence appropriate to oratory.

There is no contradiction between Symmachus’s claim that he cannot follow the “old-fashioned and comic style” of Naucellius and the advice to his son to “mix *also* some old-fashioned and comic elements” in his letters. Symmachus himself is very fond of the language of Roman comedy, as shown by his frequent use of words and expressions found in Plautus and Terence.⁷¹

The stylistic (and archaizing) tendency to mine Roman comedy for words and expressions is a standard feature of epistolography and is by no means an innovation of the fourth century. One example in this regard will suffice, namely a letter of Pliny the Younger that shows that prose letters were written with attention to the style of Plautus and Terence already in the second century.⁷² As Elaine Fantham points out, notwithstanding the fact that comic dramatists wrote in verse, Latin comedy provides “the only extensive evidence for the figurative language of good colloquial Latin.”⁷³ This proximity of the language of comedy to spoken Latin might be the reason why the language of comedy is cultivated in epistolography.⁷⁴

The evidence provided by both letters reconfirms the fact that Symmachus does not entirely reject *vetustas* as a stylistic device in epistolography, but he is firmly opposed to an excessive use of archaisms in letter-writing, because he considers that aesthetically unappealing. Symmachus’s advice to his son to tone down his letters is ultimately consistent with his criticism of Naucellius for an indiscriminate use of *vetustas* in letter-writing.⁷⁵ That advice is an expression of Symmachus’s

⁷¹ For Symmachus’s use of expressions borrowed from Latin comedy, see Kroll, *De Q. Aurelii Symmachi studiis*.

⁷² Cf. *Epistulae*, 6.21, where the exquisite style and appropriate use of comic elements in the letter of his correspondent makes it impossible for Pliny to believe that the letters were written by his friend’s wife!

⁷³ Fantham, *Comparative Studies*, x.

⁷⁴ The references to comedy would also add the sheen of colloquialism to the letter, thus reinforcing the impression that it is a written conversation.

⁷⁵ For Symmachus’s general attitude towards archaisms in letter writing, see Lellia Cracco Ruggini “Arcaismo e conservatorismo, innovazione e rinnovamento (IV–V secolo),” *Colloque genevois sur Symmaque*, 133–56; Bruggisser, *Symmaque*, 317–18; Gerd Haverling “Sullo stile di Simmaco,” *Pagani*

stylistic ideal with regards to epistolography and seems remarkably close to the rather moderate and balanced view expressed by Julius Victor concerning the use of *vetustas*, according to which it is permissible to employ “old fashioned words” (*prisca verba*) in letter-writing, if they are used in spoken Latin, but one should avoid words that have fallen out of use.⁷⁶

Notwithstanding the light and ironic tone of the letter to Naucellius, which ultimately proposes to maintain the stylistic status quo,⁷⁷ Symmachus’s criticism of (excessive) *vetustas* is serious, and the letter to Naucellius is valuable for our understanding of Symmachus’s ideal of epistolary style.⁷⁸ The tongue-in-cheek tone of the letter does not imply Symmachus’s indifference to the issue, and the fact that epistolary style is an issue raised in a number of letters, as shown above, indicates Symmachus’s profound interest in the question. Moreover, Symmachus’s polemic against an excessive love of *vetustas* is interesting for the very reason that it focuses on the style of letter-writing, at the time when letter-writing had become a well-established genre, as shown by the attention devoted to epistolography in rhetorical treatises on epistolography.⁷⁹

The argument that Symmachus’s criticism touches upon Naucellius’s lifestyle and his escape from civic duty into the world of literature⁸⁰ seems to miss the point of Symmachus’s polemics against Naucellius’s *amor vetustatis*. Symmachus’s request that Naucellius return to Rome cannot and should not be read as an invitation to leave *otium* behind and to go back to the active world of politics; in fact, Symmachus’s invitation is the perfect expression of the epistolary topos that deems the presence of a friend preferable to the letter exchange.⁸¹

Symmachus’s polemic in the correspondence with Naucellius is exquisitely literary and strictly confined to the style of letter-writing. At that time when the extant letters to Naucellius were composed, Symmachus was actively engaged in the reorganization of his correspondence for publication,⁸² and his first book of

e cristiani da Giuliano l’Apostata al sacco di Roma, ed. Franca Ela Consolino (Catanzaro: Rubbettino, 1995), 207–24; Pellizzari, *Commento storico*, 87; and Cecconi, *Commento storico*, 262.

⁷⁶ Julius Victor, *Ars Rhetorica*, 20; cf. Pellizzari, *Commento storico*, 87.

⁷⁷ Symmachus ends his polemic by proposing some sort of truce: he will continue to enjoy Naucellius’s *vetustas* if Naucellius agrees to put up with Symmachus’s *novitas*.

⁷⁸ Against this interpretation, see Haverling, “Sullo stile di Simmaco,” 219–20.

⁷⁹ See also Jennifer Ebbeler, “Tradition, Innovation, and Epistolary *Mores* in Late Antiquity,” forthcoming in *The Blackwell Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. Philip Rousseau.

⁸⁰ For this view, see Anna Maria Ferrero, “Simmaco e Naucellio: *novitas loquendi* e *amor vetustatis*,” *De tuo tibi. Omaggio degli allievi a Italo Lana*. Pubblicazioni del Dipartimento di filologia, linguistica e tradizione classica. Università degli studi di Torino, 6 (Bologna: Patron, 1996), 411–428; here 425.

⁸¹ Ebbeler, “Tradition.”

⁸² On the publication of Symmachus’s correspondence, see most recently Sogno, *Q. Aurelius Symmachus*, 60–63, with bibliographical references.

letters may already have been in circulation.⁸³ Symmachus's stylistic polemic with Naucellius may ultimately be an indication of Symmachus's desire to establish his literary authority in the field of epistolography.⁸⁴ More important for the purposes of the current volume, Symmachus's literary 'quarrel' with Naucellius demonstrates the ways in which old age could and did become a matter of rhetoric.

⁸³ I am grateful to Michele Renee Salzman for sharing her views on the subject, which will appear in the introduction to her forthcoming commentary on the first book of Symmachus's correspondence.

⁸⁴ The issue of Symmachus's desire to establish his literary authority in the field of epistolography begs the question of what exactly was at stake for Symmachus in the polemic with Naucellius. One wonders, in fact, whether the polemic was not contrived with a view to forthcoming publication of Symmachus's correspondence.

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Winter in Heorot: Looking at Anglo-Saxon Perceptions of Age and Kingship through the Character of Hrothgar¹

Critics have long pointed to the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* and the titular character in discussions of the quintessential manifestation of the heroic ideal.² And, indeed, the young Beowulf is splendid in the stories of his manly adventures in the first two sequences of the poem: he battles sea monsters, partakes in incredible feats of exercise, and defeats a marsh-stepper with his bare hands and then its monstrous mother without any aid (barring a tainted sword that fails at the climatic moment of battle). But if Beowulf is the essence of masculine ideal, what should we make of Hrothgar—the aged king of Denmark who fails to protect his country from the ravages of a single, man-shaped monster? Hrothgar, much like the self portrait of Titian, circa 1560, as an old man (discussed in the essay by

¹ A preliminary version of this article was presented at the *International Symposium on Old Age in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* in Tucson, AZ on April 27, 2006; I would like to thank Prof. Albrecht Classen for that opportunity. I would also like to express my gratitude to Robert Hasenfratz, Frederick Biggs, and Thomas Jambeck for their advice and encouragement.

² See Leo Carruthers, "Kingship and Heroism in Beowulf," *Heroes and Heroines in Medieval English Literature: A Festschrift Presented to André Crépin on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Leo Carruthers (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), 19–29. Edward Irving, "What to Do With Old Kings," *Comparative Research on Oral Traditions: A Memorial for Milman Parry*, ed. John Miles Foley (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1987), 259–68. Clare A. Lees, "Men and Beowulf," *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clara A. Lees, Thelma S. Fenster, and Jo Ann McNamara. Medieval Cultures, 7 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 129–48.; Judy Ann White, *Hero-Ego in Search of Self: A Jungian Reading of Beowulf*. Studies in the Humanities, 7 (New York: Peter Lang, 2004); Judy King, "Launching the Hero: the Case of Scyld and Beowulf," *Neophilologus* 87.3 (2003): 453–71; Brian McFadden, "Sleeping after the Feast: Deathbeds, Marriage Beds, and the Power Structure of Heorot," *Neophilologus* 84 (2000): 629–46. Raymond Tripp, "The Exemplary Role of Hrothgar and Heorot," *Philological Quarterly* 56.1 (1977): 123–29; Kevin Kiernan, "Grendel's Heroic Mother," *In Geradagum: Essays on Old and Middle English Language and Literature* 6 (1984): 13–33; Michael Lapidge, "The Archetype of Beowulf," *Anglo-Saxon England* 29 (2000): 5–41.

Sophie Bostock in this volume), sits, inactive, contained within his hall and misery, awaiting a hero. Here is a character who is not acting as a king "should" by our perception of the Anglo-Saxon heroic ideal; indeed, we feel, he remains powerless against monstrous invaders, as well as his own overwhelming emotions. However, is the image of Hrothgar as a failed king the perception of the Anglo-Saxon or modern reader? While the essays of Anouk Jansen, Connie Scarborough, and Martha Peacock in this volume highlight the medieval perception of unnatural elderly activities in the later Middle Ages, it is modern scholarship that has projected our own concerns or misinterpretations onto the character of the aged king in the Old English *Beowulf*.

Albrecht Classen, in his 1998 essay "The Cry-Baby Kings in Courtly Romances," contends that overt displays of emotion do not necessarily indicate a negative social view:

even when a king cries in front of his people he does not display his emotions without some specific intentions, be they ritual, be they political, be they affect-oriented for religious reasons. In other words, seeming passivity and inadequate performance were not always a reflection of a king's failure as a ruler, depending on the situation outlined in medieval romances and chronicles.³

Although Classen discusses the later medieval courtly romances, specifically Arthurian romances, I would argue that the same benchmark applies to the earlier Anglo-Saxon kings. In both cases, our modern scholarly perception of failed medieval rulers does not necessarily indicate a similar medieval sensibility. On the contrary, Hrothgar's obvious inability to halt the incursions against his people, which has led to numerous slights of modern criticism against his masculinity and kingship, presents the image of an effective elderly ruler, within the context of an Anglo-Saxon audience.

In order to discuss Anglo-Saxon perceptions of the elderly and what that means for the aged king in *Beowulf*, it is first necessary to establish what age *was* old in the Anglo-Saxon period. Were people old at thirty, fifty, eighty?⁴ In addition to asking what constitutes old to the Anglo-Saxon people, we must also consider what it *means* to be old in this period. Were the elderly actually seen as a discrete group? Were they marginalized as unproductive members of society; were they revered for their experiential wisdom; or were they simply ignored? The numerous age of man schemas, pictured in Harry Peters's essay in this volume, offer insight into the

³ Albrecht Classen, "The Cry-Baby Kings in Courtly Romances: What Is Wrong with Medieval Kingship," *Studi Medievali* 3a Series, 39.2 (1998): 833–63; here 835.

⁴ For close reading of Carolingian sources (European mainland) regarding the attitude toward old age, see the contribution to this volume by Valerie L. Garver. For an analysis of old age as reflected in medieval Latin sources, see the contribution by Juanita Feros Ruys.

early medieval concept of geriatrics. Ubiquitously transmitted in the Anglo-Saxon period, Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* describes each of the six stages of life, achieving a zenith in the fourth age and then declining into decrepitude. The elderly comprise the penultimate division of life:

The fourth [age] is youth, the strongest of all the ages, ending in the fiftieth year. The fifth is the age of the elder, or maturity, which is a period of decline from youth toward old age. It is not yet old age, but neither is it any longer youth. . . . This age begins in the fiftieth year and ends in the seventieth. Sixth comes old age, which is limited to no particular number of years, for whatever remains of life after the previous five ages is assigned to it. Decrepitude is the last part of old age, to be understood as the conclusion of the sixth age⁵

The *Etymologiae* describes youth, the ages of twenty-eight through fifty, as man's strongest, which then decline for twenty years during maturity, a twilight time of neither youth, nor advanced age.⁶ Old age, beginning in the seventieth year, is a period of increasing physical weakness in man's life, declining into decrepitude—an indeterminate age when cognitive and physical abilities depart almost entirely.⁷ Numerous authors explore the deleterious effects of old age, as we see in Albrecht Classen's introduction to this volume,⁸ but all is not lost for the elderly. Although precariously teetering on the edge of systemic, bodily failure, old age, according to Isidore, benefits as well as weakens man. "Infirmity and bitterness" may try the elderly, age also "imposes measure on enjoyment, breaks the force of desire, strengthens wisdom, and confers more mature understanding."⁹

Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* also explains that the term "senate" comes from the age of the members preferred for that position, "because they were seniors (*senior*)."¹⁰ It may be that age increases infirmities, but as the preferred age for senators highlights, the increased wisdom of age grants them new areas of productivity. Isidore's schematic, then, suggests that old age, while admittedly a period of declining faculties, does not relegate man to the utter marginality of uselessness. Despite what our popular culture may believe of the Anglo-Saxon period, or more generally of the Middle Ages, or even of the modern era, life does not end at thirty!

⁵ J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 201.

⁶ Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 201.

⁷ Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 201.

⁸ His introduction also highlights the numerous alternative perspectives expressed in medieval and early-modern sources. See also his analysis in "The Cry-Baby Kings in Courtly Romances."

⁹ Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 61.

¹⁰ *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. Stephen Barney, et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 203.

We can add to our understanding of the Anglo-Saxon perception of geriatrics through a very brief consideration of the Venerable Bede's *De Temporum Ratione*. In the following heavily ellipsized passage, I present only Bede's discussion of youth and the elderly:

Also man himself, whom sages call 'microcosmos' or a lesser world, has a body compounded according to the same ubiquitous qualities, with the individual humours of which it consists imitating the nature of the seasons in which they are most powerful. Thus . . . red cholers, which increase in summer, are hot and dry; . . . and phlegms, which increase in winter, are cold and moist. Furthermore, . . . red cholers in young people, . . . and phlegms predominate in old people . . . red cholers make people lean (even though they eat heartily), swift-footed, bold, irritable, and active . . . and phlegms produce people who are sluggish, sleepy, and forgetful.¹¹

The elderly, defined as individuals who are governed by their phlegmatic natures, suffer from slowness to act and impaired mental faculties, as compared to youths who are quick to act. If we assume that the vast popularity of Bede's and Isidore's work in some way reflects a more commonly view of old age, we find that, as much as there was one Anglo-Saxon belief on anything, the prevailing perception is that the elderly, although slow to act and mentally weakened, benefit from their experiential wisdom. If we turn now to *Beowulf*, we find that this schema for old age coincides with the characterizations of the aged king.

We know from *Beowulf*'s landing on the Danish shore, that Hrothgar is "old" — the hero refers to him as "frod ond god" (279; old and wise).¹² Hrothgar himself later informs us that he has ruled Denmark for a long time:

Swa ic Hring-Dena hund missera
weold under wolcnum ond hig wigge beleac
manigum mægþa geond þysne middangeard,
æscum ond ecgum, þæt ic me ænigne
under swegles begong gesacan ne tealde. (1769–803)

[Thus I ruled the Half-Danes for a hundred half-years under clouds and protected them against war from many a tribe throughout this earth, with spears and swords, that I myself did not consider any (man) under the expanse of heaven an enemy.]

Hrothgar peacefully rules Denmark for one hundred "half-years," or fifty years. He then rules during the time of Grendel's attacks, which, as we learn from the text, last twelve years. Even if Hrothgar prodigiously takes the throne of Denmark at the age of eight, instead of the more likely twenty or more, he is at least seventy at the time of *Beowulf*'s arrival. He might also be in his eighties, or even nineties.

¹¹ Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 202.

¹² *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed. Fr. Klaeber, ed. (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1950). All translations of Anglo-Saxon works are my own.

In other words, by nearly any standard, modern or medieval, Hrothgar is most decidedly *old*. It is, however, entirely possible that “fifty years” is simply a conventional demarcation of the passage of time toward the end of a reign, as Hrothgar and later Beowulf rule their kingdoms for the same span. We should probably not try to assign any specific age to Hrothgar, for, as J. A. Burrow notes in *The Ages of Man*, scholars “should not look [to *Beowulf*] for the precision to which Latin age-schemas aspire.”¹³ But even assuming a lack of specificity in Hrothgar’s age, the length of his reign exceeds that of most, if not all, Anglo-Saxon kings. Unless we wish to speculate that the poet is incapable of addition, we must assume that the intention was to portray the Danish king as unambiguously old.

Why is this significant?

Simply put, it is because of his old age that Hrothgar fails to protect his people from the menacing of Grendel. For twelve years, Grendel murders and eats Thanes until Heorot stands empty and Hrothgar sits, continually brooding, *ne mihte snotor hæleð/wean onwendan; wæs þæt gewin to swyð, / laþ ond longsum, þe on ða leode becom, / nydwracu niþgrim, nihtbealwa mæst* (190–93; nor might that wise man turn aside woe; the need-wrack, the violence-grim, the greatest night-bale, was too strong, loathsome and long). Hrothgar himself reports that Grendel’s attacks cause him to carry “*socne singales wæg/modceare micle*” (1777–78; continually the great mind-sorrow of persecution). As we saw above in Isidore’s and Bede’s schemas, old age brings physical weakness. Although there is nothing to suggest that Hrothgar suffers from the other hallmarks of advancing age, being sleepy or forgetful, the image of an elderly king, sitting on his throne and dwelling on the attacks he is physically incapable of fighting is certainly one of bitterness and sluggishness. In Anglo-Saxon verse, the image of the sorrowing man is not uncommon. *The Wanderer*, for example, displays poignantly one man’s painful lamentations.

Although not specifically an elderly man, the speaker suggests that he has passed his share of winters and experienced loss. He speaks of his sorrow with simple grace: “*Ne mæg werig mod wyrde wiðstondan, ne se hreo hyge helpe gefremman*” (42; A weary heart cannot withstand fate, / Nor can the troubled mind offer succour).¹⁴ Despite the speaker’s later insistence that those who are concerned

¹³ Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 125. Although Burrow does not affix any specific age to Hrothgar, Bernd-Ulrich Hergemöller, *Die Kindlein spotten meiner schier: Quellen und Reflexionen zu den Alten und zum Verreisungsprozeß im Mittelalter*. Hergemöllers Historiographische Libelli, IV (Hamburg: HHL-Verlag, 2006), 30–43, refers to rulers and leading members of the Church who reached advanced ages. See also Albrecht Classen’s introduction to this volume for a more complete discussion of Hergemöller’s work. For the phenomenon of old rulers in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Venice, see Sophie Bostock’s contribution to this volume.

¹⁴ “The Wanderer,” *Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. Elaine Trehearne (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 42.

for their reputations must refrain from public displays of grief, the poem itself is an elegant expression of sorrow. He is no longer a heroic warrior, but rather a sad, tired man who has experienced great loss in his journey. The image of the lamenting poet echoes the sorrowful disposition of the king in *Beowulf*. Hrothgar, troubled by the "socne . . . modceare micle" (1777–78; great mind-sorrow of persecution), cannot "wyrde wiðstondan" (42; withstand fate) and his "hreo hyge" (42; troubled mind) brings no "helpe" (42; succor) from Grendel's slaughter.

Elderly expressions of grief are not a purely Anglo-Saxon phenomenon, but occur also in the twelfth century *Egil's Saga*. Although the Nowell Codex is two centuries older than the manuscript that contains *Egil's Saga*, the similarity of grief between the two Germanic poets suggests a shared cultural perspective. In a poem attributed directly to Egil Skallagrimsson, the *Sonatorrek*, the self-proclaimed elderly father grieves for the death of his two sons. Egil's lamentations begin with a description of his torporific state that is very reminiscent of Hrothgar's inactivity during Grendel's attacks:

My tongue is sluggish / for me to move, / my poem's scales / ponderous to raise. / The
god's prize is beyond my grasp, / tough to drag out / from my mind's haunts. / Since
heavy sobbing / is the cause . . .¹⁵

Egil's *Sonatorrek* and Hrothgar's bitter sorrow in *Beowulf* show parallel mourning between an old man for his lost sons and an old king for his troubled people. Much like Hrothgar's inability to turn his mind from his constant brooding over Grendel's attacks, Egil here is slow to create an elegy for his dead sons because of his deep mourning. Like Hrothgar, Egil is unable to undertake his accustomed deeds—the king cannot perform heroic feats, the poet cannot create a verse. But are such public displays of sorrow and sluggishness problematic for our understanding of the efficacy of Hrothgar's reign?

For Brian McFadden, in "Sleeping After the Feast," Hrothgar's mournful inactivity has a calamitous result for his reign:

[Thane-sorrow] suggests Hrothgar's grief for losing thirty thanes, but it also implies that he has lost the confidence of his company and must endure their disrespect. Moreover, that the act can be repeated nightly with impunity represents a violation of trust. The lord was expected to protect his thanes, and if one successful attack on the hall was embarrassing, two or more would have been considered shameful and politically crippling.¹⁶

Although the purpose of this article is to promote the political power of *Wealtheow*, it is through the feminization (as failure) of Hrothgar that he does so.

¹⁵ *Egil's Saga*, ed. with an intro. and notes by Svanhildur Óskarsdóttir, trans. Bernard Scudder (1930; New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 171.

¹⁶ Brian McFadden, "Sleeping after the Feast," 633.

This argument suggests the king's inability to rule Denmark because of his failure to live up to a heroic code for kingship. There is ample evidence to support McFadden's argument that rulers should be heroic in their attitudes toward war. King Athelstan and Edmund Aetheling are described in the initial lines of *The Battle of Brunanburh*, as winning eternal glory: "Her Æðelstan cyning, eorla dryhten,/ beorna beahgifa, and his broðor eac,/ Eadmund æðeling, ealdorlangene tir/ geslogon æt sæcce sweorda ecgum" (28; Here King Athelstan, lord of warriors, ring-giver to men, and his brother also, Prince Edmund, life-long glory won in strife with the edges of swords).¹⁷ Brythnoth in *The Battle of Maldon* jumps directly into the fray, fights, and dies gloriously — although some modern scholars argue it is through his own foolish pride or over confidence in his men.¹⁸ However, the wealth of Anglo-Saxon verse that extols the virtues of heroic princes, kings, and earls does not confirm the shamefulness of Hrothgar's inactivity. In 937, at the Battle of Brunanburh, King Athelstan is most likely between the ages of forty and fifty. He is not young by our standards, but he still falls within the Isidorian age of Youth, or "the strongest of all the ages."¹⁹ So while Athelstan does act as a heroic king in his own right, he does so at the strongest point in his career.

In order to understand more thoroughly how the Anglo-Saxon culture may have perceived Hrothgar's reign, we need to think about kingship within the text of *Beowulf*. Ideal Anglo-Saxon kings, in the poem, fulfill two distinct roles: the dispenser of rings in peace and the guardian of the people during strife. In other words, kings must be generous during times of prosperity, giving treasure, horses, and land, but protect their people and territory from the threat of invasion. In *Life in Anglo-Saxon England*, R. I. Page writes that these roles are a "popular literary motif."²⁰ They are certainly not limited to *Beowulf*. As we saw above, heroic kings range from fiction to fictionalized history. The gnomic statements of the Cotton and Exeter manuscripts also support the ideals of kingship as presented in *Beowulf*. Written in the middle of the eleventh century, these guiding thoughts, if not known to the *Beowulf* poet personally, represent an attitude toward kingship also found within the text of *Beowulf*.²¹ In these brief statements, kings should be protective and munificent:

Cyning sceal rice healdan.
Cyning sceal mid ceape cwene gebicgan

¹⁷ Treharne, *Old and Middle English Literature*, 28.

¹⁸ *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, selected, with an introduction and parallel trans. Richard Frederick Sanger Hamer (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), 48.

¹⁹ F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 343.

²⁰ R. I. Page, *Life in Anglo-Saxon England*. English Life Series (London: Batsford; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970), 48.

²¹ Blanche Colton Williams, *Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon*. Columbia University Studies in English and Comparative Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1914), 83.

bunum and beagum: bu sceolon ærest
geofum god wesan. (82–85)

[A king must preserve (his) kingdom. The king shall buy the queen with property, cups and rings: both must first be good with gifts.]²²

And, “Cyning sceal on healle / beagas dælan” (28; A king must divide rings in the hall). Although the scribe writes these gnomes at least twenty-five years after the creation of the Nowell codex, they present ideas of kingship that echo in *Beowulf* itself. A king must preserve, or hold, his kingdom and distribute wealth. Both kings and queens must be “good with gifts.” In *Beowulf*, we learn almost immediately of the importance of gift giving to the successful rule of men. Through the gifts of rings, men should retain the favor and aid of their thanes in future times of war:

Swa sceal geong guma gode gewyrcean,
fromum feohgiftumon fæder bearme,
þæt hine on ylde eft gewunigen
wilgesipas, þonne wig cume,
leode gelæsten; lofdædum sceal
in mægþa gehwære man geþeon. (20–25)

[So shall a young man bring about by generosity, splendid fee-gifts, in the possession of (his) father, so that dear companions remain in turn (with) him in old age when war comes; people should follow with glory-deeds; one shall prosper in each tribe.]

It is precisely this magnanimity that we find in Heorot. Indeed, Hrothgar’s excellence in dispensing gifts is unquestioned by *Beowulf*, the narrator, or even modern critics. In addition to the benefits of generosity, the *Beowulf* poet also comments on the dangers of greed, creating a natural comparison between a good, generous king and a bad, miserly one:

Hwæþere him on ferhþe greow
breosthord blodreow; nallas beagas geaf
Denum æfter dome; dreamleas gebad,
þæt he þæs gewinnes weorc þrowade,
leodbealo longsum. (1718–22)

[Nevertheless in (Heremod’s) heart the breast-hoard grew blood-thirsty; he gave no rings at all to the Danes for glory; he survived joyless so that he suffered pain of battle, an enduring harm to (his) people.]

Just as the young man in the gnomic statements must give treasures to his men to win their loyalty and aid in later years, so too must rulers give rings to their

²² Williams, *Gnomic Poetry in Anglo-Saxon*, 121, vv. 82–84.

people to experience joy. Heremod's greed, the enduring failure of leadership inflicted on his people, leads to the pain he suffers in battle. Hrothgar tells this story to Beowulf as a lesson in proper rule, but its position in the poem serves as a nice contrast to his own generosity.

As noted by William C. McDonald, treasure "provided a unifying element in society because it was a medium for rewarding heroes and settling feuds. It also served to define the worth of men, generous givers and meritorious recipients alike."²³ These are not one sided gifts, as further argued by McDonald, but rather gift giving and gift receiving enters both parties into a relationship of reciprocity: the ruler gives gifts and the warriors fight on his behalf.²⁴ We see this argument fulfilled in Hrothgar's munificence in *Beowulf*. Hrothgar gives gifts lavishly to those around him, and in consequence, receives aid when the "gewinnes weorc" (1721; the pain of battle) threatens him. Although the heroic ideal for kingship may support McFadden's argument superficially, it does not condemn a physically weakened ruler as a failure. Good kings are not merely those who fight well, but also those who earn the respect and allegiance of others through their munificence and reputation. The emphasis on generosity in Anglo-Saxon texts and the *Beowulf* poet's focus on a bad king who does not give freely suggest that good kings are "ring givers" even above heroic warriors.

Furthermore, McFadden's conviction of Hrothgar's crippled rule has no direct textual evidence within *Beowulf* to support it. Instead, the poet goes to great lengths to state the opposite through his own voice and that of his characters; Hrothgar is twice the "eodor Scyldinga" (428, 663; defender of the Scyldings), three times the "helm Scyldinga" (371, 456, 1321; protector of the Scyldings), and also the "eodor Ingwina" (1044; defender of the Ingwines), and the "folces hyrde" (610; shepherd of the people). The poet's words do not indicate culpability on the part of Hrothgar. While the king may indeed be the picture of miserable phlegmatic sluggishness before Beowulf's arrival, the poet still refers to him as the "wise man, warrior, hero." Even at Hrothgar's most inactive, the poet as narrator does not condemn him as a leader: "Ne hie huru winedrihten wiht ne logon, / glædne Hroðgar, ac þæt wæs god cyning" (862-63; Indeed they (the Danes) did not find fault with (their) friend-lord at all, gracious Hrothgar, but that was a good king). It is this last clause that carries the weight of the lines, and has a specific function in Anglo-Saxon poetry.²⁵

²³ William C. McDonald, "'Too Softly a Gift of Treasure': A Rereading of the Old High German *Hildebrandslied*," *Euphorion* 78 (1984): 1-16; here 6.

²⁴ McDonald, "Too Softly a Gift of Treasure," 6.

²⁵ It is interesting to note that none of Hrothgar's men are capable of defeating Grendel either. However, for the purposes of this paper, to know which specific warrior defeats Grendel is less vital than the fact that Hrothgar cannot do it himself. Whether the hero comes from across the sea, or across the hall, the result remains that Hrothgar, while in his weakened and elderly state, must rely

In his "Gnomic Statements in Old English Poetry," Michael S. Fukuchi states that gnomic sentiments expressed by the poet, such as "that was a good king," above, "are primarily interpretative in function. They give the values to be used in the poem and set the criteria for interpreting it."²⁶ Even given the frequent repetition of Hrothgar's wisdom and reputation in the speeches of the title character, the *Beowulf* poet seeks to reinforce the idea that Hrothgar is a wise king through the narrator's statements. There is no reason to suspect irony in the poet's interjection that Hrothgar "wæs god cyning" (863; was a good king). Other examples of the same format apply to Scyld Scefing—the ancestral hero of the Danes (line 11)—and to Beowulf himself (line 2390).²⁷ Additionally, the construction appears with a definite lack of irony in the poet's discussion of the Finnsburh Episode. Hildeburh watches her son and brother burn together on a funeral pyre, and the poet exclaims "þæt wæs geomuru ides!" (1075; That was a mournful woman) Hildeburh certainly mourns while watching the funeral of close family members, including her child. Instead of irony, more likely the formula is one of subtle understatement expressing in the simplest terms an unfathomable truth. This is not to say, however, that Hrothgar is an entirely powerful king. He may be a wise king, but, as McFadden rightly asserts, he is not a physically strong one. This does not mean, however, that the *Beowulf* poet finds fault with Hrothgar because of his physical limitations.²⁸

In his 1977 article, "The Exemplary Role of Hrothgar and Heorot," Raymond P. Tripp notes that the *Beowulf* poet is remarkably lacking in any censure of Hrothgar.²⁹ The same poet that highlights the failings of Heremod, now restrains himself from condemning a king who fails to protect his people so badly that he,

on the physical strength of others and his own ability to command respect to stop the attacks. Additionally, a hero from within Hrothgar's own hall would add the possibility for political upheaval should the native hero decide to usurp the throne.

²⁶ Michael S. Fukuchi, "Gnomic Statements in Old English Poetry," *Neophilologus* 59.4 (1975): 610–03; here 610.

²⁷ While it is possible to point to the questionable efficacy of Beowulf's rule, it is important to note that the poet suggests it went well: "He geheold tela / fiftig wintra" ("He held (it) well for fifty winters," 2208–09). Much of the manuscript is damaged at this point, so I do not wish to extrapolate the poet's intentions, but it does at least echo the gnomic statement "þæt wæs god cyning" ("that was a good king," 2390) and indicates a positive kingship. The primary difficulty with both Scyld and Beowulf is not what occurs during their rule, but rather their lack of a successful heir afterwards.

²⁸ McFadden, "Sleeping after the Feast," 635: "Either way, the escapee has fled to the 'burum' ('bedchambers'). This word occurs only once elsewhere in the poem, as the compound 'brydbur' ('women's chambers') which gives the word a feminine connotation, especially when the male warriors are usually associated with the hall. Power is not only inverted militarily but sexually; Hrothgar's defeat in the hall has feminized the lord, and his later departure in line 664 to seek out Wealtheow in her quarters suggests that power has moved to the women's quarters."

²⁹ Raymond Tripp, "The Exemplary Role of Hrothgar and Heorot," *Philological Quarterly* 56.1 (1977): 123–29; here 123.

in the words of McFadden, “must endure their disrespect.”³⁰ Instead of this likely point of interjection, the poet focuses on Hrothgar’s wisdom and age. The Anglo-Saxon words for wise, old, good, and prudent describe the king no fewer than eight times in the text. “Frod” (or “old *and* wise”) especially reinforces the relationship of the elderly with experiential wisdom as, according to J. A. Burrow, “It is a favourite word of Anglo-Saxon poets, and its semantic behaviour shows better than any other evidence how inextricably interlinked were the ideas of old age and wisdom in their minds.”³¹ Indeed, one of Beowulf’s first descriptions of Hrothgar is *frod*: “Ic þæs Hroðgar mæg/þurh rumne sefan ræd gelæran,/hu he frod ond god feond oferswyðeþ” (277–79; I may teach Hrothgar of that through a roomy heart, counsel, how he, old and wise and good (*frod and god*), may overpower the enemy). This may be a convention of diplomacy on Beowulf’s part, complimenting the ruler of the land into which he wishes to travel. Equally as likely, however, is that Beowulf’s description of Hrothgar’s wisdom has come to him from outside sources and he repeats the favorable epithet to the king’s guard.

Nothing in Hrothgar’s court changes Beowulf’s opinion of his wisdom. He does not end his flattery of Hrothgar with mere words. Anticipating his possible death in the fight with Grendel’s mother, Beowulf entrusts the aged king with the care and maintenance of his thanes:

Gepenc nu, se mæra maga Healfdenes,
 snotttra fengel, nu ic eom siðes fus,
 goldwine gumena, hwæt wit geo spræcon,
 gif ic æt þearfe þinre scolde
 aldre linnan, þæt ðu me a wære
 forðgewitenum on fæder stæle.
 Wes þu mundbora minum magoþegnum
 hondgesellum, gif mec hild nime;
 swylce þu ða madmas, þe þu me sealdest,
 Hroðgar leofa, Higelace onsend.
 Mæg þonne on þæm golde ongitan Geata dryhten,
 geseon sunu Hrædles, þonne he on þæt sinc starað.
 þæt ic gumcystum godne funde
 beaga bryttan, breac þonne moste.
 Ond þu Unferð læt ealde lafe,
 wrætlic wægsweord widcuðne man
 heardecg habban; ic me mid Hruntinge
 dom gewyrce, oþðe mec deað nimeð! (1475–87)

[Think now, the famous son of Halfdane, wise prince, gold-friend of men, now I am ready for the journey, what we two spoke (of) before, if I should part from life at your

³⁰ McFadden, “Sleeping after the Feast,” 635.

³¹ Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 107.

distress, that you should be to me ever departed forth in the place of a father. Be the hand-bearer to my young thanes, (my) hand-companions, if the battle should take me; likewise the treasures which you gave to me, beloved Hrothgar, send on forward to Higelac. The Lord of the Geats might then see in the gold, to see the son of Hrethel, when he looks on the treasure. That I found the good (one) (Hrothgar) with many virtues, the dispenser of rings, (that) I enjoyed when I could.)

This is not an empty compliment or respectful salutation combining the king's obvious age with his presumed wisdom. Beowulf presciently recognizes the difficulty of a battle in which he later despairs of life. Not only does Beowulf praise Hrothgar as a wise prince and a gold-friend of the Danish people, but he also believes it is sufficient to reward his own men. In addition, he wants Hrothgar's reputation as a noble king, a "dispenser of rings" to travel back to his own land and even spreads Hrothgar's reputation of wisdom and munificence himself, telling Hygelac later: "Me ðis hildesceorp Hroðgar sealed, / snotra fengel" (2155–56; Hrothgar, wise prince, gave this battle-equipment to me). Beowulf's continual complimentary recognition of Hrothgar's wisdom could be individually explained as sycophancy, derision, or irony, but the simpler explanation is that the *Beowulf* poet wishes to express, through the hero's actions and words, that Hrothgar is a wise king. Given the poet's wealth of praise and lack of condemnation, we must recognize that Hrothgar's expressions of grief and failure to protect his people do not suggest his failure as king, but are instead continued evidence of his advanced age.

However, despite all of Hrothgar's experiential wisdom and the poem's praise, critics still question the efficacy of his rule. In addition to Hrothgar's inability to protect his people, he fails to express the appropriate "masculine" reaction to the death of Æschere and the departure of Beowulf. Upon the death of Æschere at the hands of Grendel's mother, instead of declaring vengeance for his friend or exacting wergild for his thane, Hrothgar remembers their battle-proud youth, mourning openly and, as some claim, excessively:

Ne frin þu æfter sælum! Sorh is geniwod
 Denigea leodum. Dead is Æschere,
 Yrmenlafes yldra broþor,
 min runwita ond min rædbora,
 eaxlgestealla, ðonne we on orlege
 hafelan weredon, þonne hniton feþan,
 eoferas cnysedan. Swylc scolde eorl wesian.
 æpeling ærgod, swylc Æschere wæs!
 Wearð him on Heorote to handbanan
 wælgæst wæfre; ic ne wat hwæder
 atol æse wlanc eftsiðas teah,
 fylle gefægnod. Heo þa fæhðe wræc,
 þe þu gystran niht Grendel cwealde

þurh hæstne had heardum clammum,
 forþan he to lange leode mine
 wanode ond wyrde. He æt wige gecrang
 ealdres scyldig, ond nu oþer cwom
 mihtig manscaða, wolde hyre mæg wrecan,
 ge feor hafað fæhðe gestæled,
 þæs þe þincean mæg þegne monegum,
 se þe æfter sincgyfan on sefan greoteþ, –
 hreþerbealo hearde; nu seo hand ligeð,
 se þe eow welhwylcra wilna dohte. (1321–45)

[Do not ask about happiness! Sorrow is renewed for the people of the Danes. Aeschere, Yrmenlaf's older brother, my rune-knower and my advice-bearer, is dead, shoulder companion when we guarded heads in war when foot troops clashed boar helmets struck. A warrior should have been such a ere-good nobleman such as Aeschere was! The restless slaughter-ghost became as a handbane to him in Heorot; I did not know where to, the horrific one, proud of carrion undertook a back journey, made glad with the feast. She avenged the feud, by which you yesterday night killed Grendel in a violent way, in a hard grasp, because he diminished and destroyed my people too long. He died in battle, having forfeited (his) life, and now another mighty sin-scatter came, she wished to avenge her kinsman, and she had avenged the feud from far, therefore it may seem to many a thane that he who wept in mind after treasure-giving, –hard heart bale; now the hand that which you availed of everyone's wishes, lies.]

The elderly man laments the death of his old friend, Æschere, taken by Grendel's mother in retribution for the death of her son. In his speech Hrothgar lauds the virtues of his "advice bearer," laments the return of the "slaughter-ghost," and reminds Beowulf of his culpability in the renewed attacks. *Because* Beowulf dealt a death blow to the monster, and *because* he hung Grendel's arm from the rafters of Heorot, Grendel's mother continues the blood feud and brings more death to Denmark. Hrothgar speaks of the murder in terms of vengeance—reiterating variations on the verb "to avenge" (*wræc*, *wrecan*, and *gestæled*) three times in eight lines. This is not a mere lamentation of an ineffective ruler, but rather a provocation toward vengeance. Hrothgar is spurring Beowulf to action and succeeds in the vicarious protection of his people.

The idea that an elderly man cannot personally face the murderer of his people is not limited solely to *Beowulf*. If we return to *Egil's Saga* for a moment, we see that Egil Skallagrímsson also finds himself unable to exact revenge for the death of his sons. While Hrothgar has the ability to prompt others to act on his behalf because of his rank and fame, Egil has no recourse, and no young heroes to avenge the drowning death of his son at sea:

If by sword I might/ avenge that deed,/ the brewer of waves/ would meet his end;/
 Smite the wind's brother/ that dashes the bay,/ do battle against the sea-god's wife./

Yet I felt/ I lacked the might / to seek justice against/ the killer of ships, / for it is clear
/ to all eyes, / how an old man / lacks helpers.³²

The personification of the ocean as the Norse sea god allows Egil a target for his rightful paternal vengeance, but he is unable to capitalize on this blood feud because of his lack of physical prowess in his advanced age and his lack of loyal retainers. His poetry alone is insufficient to prompt retaliatory actions against the sea gods from those around him. Hrothgar, while still short on personal prowess because of his age, does command the respect and debt of younger, more virile heroes. Hrothgar's strength as a king is that his legacy wins support from those who are still in their prime, and brings defense to his people from foreign shores.³³

Hrothgar himself seems to realize that he has the ability to bring protection to his people not through his own physical strength, but by commanding the allegiance of other, stronger warriors:

For gewyrhtum þu, wine min Beowulf,
ond for arstafum usic sohtest.
Gesloh þin fæder fæhðe mæste;
wearp he Heapolafe to handbonan
mid Wilfingum . . .
ða ic furpum weold folce Deniga
ond on geogoðe heold ginne rice,
hordburh hæleþa . . .
Siððan þa fæhðe feo þingode;
sende ic Wylfingum ofer wæteres hrycg
ealde madmas; he me aþas swor. (457–67)

[Because of deeds, Beowulf my friend, and because of favors, you sought us, your father brought about the greatest battle (when he) became as handbane to Heatholaf of the Wylfings . . . at that time I first ruled the Danish people and, in youth, held a spacious kingdom . . . afterwards I settled the feud with money, (I) sent old treasure over the water to the Wylfings; he (Ecgtheow) swore oaths to me.]

Hrothgar may not be able to lift a sword and fight the threats, but his rhetoric and reputation certainly drive Beowulf to do so. Instead of Beowulf's arrival for personal glory or compassionate foreign aid, Hrothgar here states plainly that it is because of a debt owed to the aged king of Denmark. This is not a helpless monarch accepting the magnanimous offer of a foreign ruler. Hrothgar here claims

³² *Egil's Saga*, 173.

³³ For more examples of inactive kings, see Albrecht Classen, "The Cry-Baby Kings in Courtly Romances." Also *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight; Pearl; Cleanness; Patience* ed. J. J. Anderson (Rutland, VT: C. E. Tuttle, 1996). The dimension of political rituals at the medieval courts, especially in Germany, is meticulously examined by Gerd Althoff, *Die Macht der Rituale: Symbolik und Herrschaft im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2003).

responsibility for bringing protection to his people. For many modern critics, however, Beowulf's one admonition to cease mourning undermines the strength of Hrothgar's provocative language.

And indeed, Beowulf's response to Hrothgar's lamentation could possibly suggest that Hrothgar's inability to avenge the death of his thane is in some way shameful:

Ne sorga, snotor guma! Selre bið æghwæm,
 þæt he his freond wrece, þonne he fela murne.
 Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan
 worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote
 domes ær deaþe; þæt bið drihtguman
 unlifgendum æfter selest.
 Aris, rices weard, uto hraþe feras.
 Grendles magan gang sceawigan.
 Ic hit þe gehate: no he on helm losað,
 ne on foldan fæþm, ne on fyrghenolt,
 ne on gyfenes grund, ga þær he wille!
 Ðys dogor þu gepylð hafa
 weana gehwylces, swa ic þe wene to. (1383–96)

[Do not grieve, wise man! It is better for everyone that he should avenge his friend than he should mourn much. Each of us must await the end of life of the world; (he) should accomplish glory before death, he who may; afterwards, that is best for unliving troop-men. Arise guardian of the kingdom, let me go quickly to see the track of Grendel's kinswoman. I promise it to you; she (will) not at all get away into protection nor into the embrace of the earth, nor into the mountain-wood, nor into the bottom of the ocean, where she should wish to go! Have patience this day of each woe, as I expect you to do.]

If Hrothgar's brooding during Grendel's attacks and lamentation for the death of his friend are indicative of a phlegmatic personality, Beowulf's speech certainly brings to mind a choleric humor. If, as suggested by Bede, red cholers make people "swift-footed, bold, irritable, and active,"³⁴ Beowulf's speech here certainly typifies the age. Beowulf wishes to go "quickly" to find Grendel's mother and take vengeance on her for Æschere's death. He exemplifies the idea of swift-footed, bold, and active.³⁵ Contrasted to the initial, sedentary image of Hrothgar in lines 190–91 and the mournful reminiscent king in 1321–45, Beowulf appears as the epitome of an active hero. While age and phlegmatic humor lead to Hrothgar's brooding and emotional attachment to the past, Beowulf lives in the present and immediate future. He does not want to remember the dead, as Hrothgar does, but

³⁴ Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 202.

³⁵ While we can also assume that Beowulf is at least somewhat irritated, or perhaps enraged, by the loss of Æschere and of his trophy, he does not appear overly irritable at this point.

rather wishes to go "hrape" (89; quickly) and face his new challenge. It is still, however, Hrothgar's words that incite Beowulf to action.

Hrothgar's inability to react in an "appropriately" masculine way does not stop with the death of a dear friend. The oft discussed "Hrothgar's tears" episode also creates an apparent contrast between the virile warrior and the clinging, dependent old man. Brian McFadden suggests that Hrothgar's tears are in expectation of the doom that will befall Heorot and Hrothgar's familial line without a strong protector.³⁶ Edward Irving's theory incorporates the Isidorian concepts of wisdom and mature understanding of advancing age, yet feels "it also reveals what must be called weakness in the heroic context . . . it betrays a terrible dependence."³⁷ Howell Chickering, in the notes to his edition, agrees to an extent, arguing that the poet may "imply that it is weak, unmanly, for the elderly to feel such emotional bonds so strongly."³⁸ In this line of criticism, Hrothgar's tears at best betray his weakness as a king—at worst they foretell the destruction of his country and rule. On the opposite end of the debate, Thomas Wright redeems Hrothgar, considering the departure a moment of male-bonding, that the tears are a confirmation of Hrothgar's dignity and are, moreover, a shared response for Hrothgar and Beowulf.³⁹ Although there is little in the passage to suggest that Beowulf joins Hrothgar in a "good cry," there is equally as little to suggest that Hrothgar despairs of his impending doom. Given the king's age at the time of Beowulf's departure, it is unlikely that he will see the young hero again, a thought that occurs to Hrothgar:

Gecyste þa cyning æpelum god,
 þeoden Scyldinga ðegn betstan
 ond be healse genam; hrunon him tearas
 blondenfeaxum. Him wæs bega wen
 ealdum infrodum, oþres swiðor,
 þæt hie seoððan no geseon moston,
 modige on meþle. Wæs him se man to þon leof,
 þæt he þone breostwylm forberan ne mehte;
 ac him on hreþre hygebendum fæst
 æfter deorum men dyrne langað
 beorn wið blode. (1870–80)

[The king, prince of the Scyldings, then kissed the good noble, the best thane and embraced his neck; tears fell from him, from the one with blended hair. To him, to the

³⁶ McFadden, "Sleeping after the Feast," 641.

³⁷ Edward Irving, "What to Do With Old Kings." *Comparative Research on Oral Traditions: A Memorial for Milman Parry* (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1987): 259–68; here 263–64.

³⁸ *Beowulf*, ed. Howell D. Chickering (New York: Anchor Books, 1977), 348.

³⁹ Thomas Wright "Hrothgar's Tears," *Modern Philology* 65.1 (1967): 39–44; here 44.

old very sage one, was one of two expectations, one more especially than the other, that they, the brave ones, might not see each other afterwards in council. The man was beloved to him to that extent, that he was not able to stop the emotion, but in his heart secretly there was longing for the dear man, burned with blood.)

Although certainly enigmatic, it is not unreasonable to read the sense of the passage as an old man's logical assumption that he will not live to see his friend again, just as Charlemagne cries at the death of Roland and his men in the Old French *Chanson de Roland* (2412–17).⁴⁰ After his long rule, Hrothgar recognizes his own advanced age and expresses remorse at this final parting as he would at the death of another friend, just as he earlier laments the passing of Æschere.

In "Kingship and Heroism in *Beowulf*," Leo Carruthers suggests that Hrothgar's age excuses his inability to protect his people: "The poet clearly makes allowances for the loss of strength that accompanies old age."⁴¹ In support of this claim, Carruthers points to the final lines regarding Hrothgar's success as a king: "þæt wæs an cyning / æghwæs orleahtr, oþ þæt hine ylðo benam / mægenes wynnum, se þe oft manegum scod" (1885–87; That was a king blameless in every respect until old age, that which often harmed many, robbed him of the joy of might). While it is certainly true that Hrothgar fails to protect his people for the twelve years of Grendel's attacks, we can see from the text that Beowulf's arrival in Denmark and his continued defense come through Hrothgar's reputation and persuasive rhetoric. He is a successful king, but he is also an old king, reaching the end of his life. Perhaps Hrothgar, in a speech to the departing Beowulf, offers the most dramatic evidence of Anglo-Saxon consideration of their advancing age:

secg betsta, ond þe þæt selre geceos,
 ece rædas; oferhyda ne gym,
 mære cempa! Nu is þines mægnes blæd
 ane hwile; eft sona bið,
 þæt þec adl oððe ecg eafopes getwæfeð,
 oððe fyres feng, oððe flodes wylm,
 oððe gripe meces, oððe gares fliht,
 oððe atol ylðo; oððe eagenas bearhtm
 forsiteð ond forsworced; semninga bið,
 þæt ðec, dryhtguma, deað oferswyðeð. (1758–67)

[Protect yourself (from) the baleful-violence, beloved Beowulf, best man, and for yourself choose the better thing, eternal benefit; do not heed pride, famous fighter! Now is your glory of might for a time; soon it will be again, that sickness or the edge separates you (from) strength, or the grasp of fire, or the welling of flood, or the grip of the sword, or the flight of the spear, or terrifying old age; or the brightness of the eye

⁴⁰ *The Song of Roland*, ed. and trans. Dorothy L. Sayers (New York: Penguin Classics, 1957).

⁴¹ Leo Carruthers, "Kingship and Heroism in *Beowulf*," 26.

fails and becomes dark; it will be straightaway, that, troopman, death will overpower you.]

Hrothgar's speech poignantly speaks to the heroic ideal. Notably sickness, fire, flood, swords, and spears, or death through action or accident, evoke no particular emotion from Hrothgar. It is *terrifying* old age alone that is worthy of adjectival qualification. Hrothgar may have succeeded in his role as king, but here perhaps his words mirror the Anglo-Saxon perception of old age—the terror of their impending decline from essentially useful action and thought to the marginality of decrepitude.

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Old Age and Women in the Carolingian World¹

When explaining the foundation of Conques around 800 in his epic poem *In Honor of Louis the Pious* (826–828), Ermold the Black describes a pivotal event in the life of Datus, a man thought to be the first inhabitant of Conques and eventually a brother at that monastery.² The wealthy Datus lived with his mother, who, Ermold notes, was fortunate, “sospite matre.”³ Although Ermold never uses a word that clearly indicates the age of Datus’s mother, his account implies that others probably considered her to be old. First, Datus is a mature man, an indication that his mother must at least be approaching 40. In describing her as “fortunate,” he suggests that she had reached an age at which misfortunes such as ill health, frailty, or family neglect may not have been unexpected. Furthermore, Datus makes a decision concerning his mother’s fate that suggests that she had outlived her relative usefulness to her son and possibly to society as a whole. Accompanied by followers, an outsider named Maures invaded the Rouergue, immediately established a fortification, and proceeded to seize Datus’s household goods as well as his mother:⁴ “Datus, ut agnovit propriam matremque domumque / Direptam, varium pectore versat onus”⁵ (“Once Datus discovered that his household goods and mother were taken, he pondered various troubling possibilities in his heart”).

Gathering his arms and his companions, he immediately set out by horseback to find Maures. Upon reaching his fortification, Datus prepared to break through the gate, but Maures did not want to face Datus in battle. The “young Maures”

¹ For valuable suggestions and comments on various versions of this essay and the paper from which it was originally drawn I would like to thank Albrecht Classen, Robert Feldacker, Robert Levine, Jonathan Lyon, and fellow scholars who attended the international symposium on “Old Age in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age,” at the University of Arizona (April 27–29, 2006).

² For more information on Datus or Dadon, see Gustave Adolphe Desjardins, *Cartulaire de l’abbaye de Conques* (Paris: Picard, 1879), iii–vi, 409–14.

³ Ermold the Black, *In Honor of Louis the Pious*, in *Ermold le Noir. Poème sur Louis le Pieux et Epitres au roi Pépin*, ed. Edmond Faral, *Les classiques de l’histoire de France au Moyen Age*, 14 (1932; Paris: Société d’Edition “Les Belles Lettres,” 1964), 24, line 245.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 24, lines 246–49.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24, lines 252–53.

jeered at him from the rampart, telling him he must give up his beloved horse for his goods and mother. Otherwise he promised to kill her right before Datus's eyes.⁶ Datus replied: "Funera matris age; nec mihi cura satis. / Nam quem poscis equum, non unquam dedere dignor, / Inprobe, haud equidem ad tua frena decet"⁷ ("Give my mother a funeral; I don't care. For you shamelessly demand this horse of which I will never deem you worthy; by no means is it fitting to give its reins to you"). Without hesitation, Maures killed Datus's mother and then held her head aloft to taunt her son. Datus instantly regretted his decision, and his profound sorrow at his loss of everything and the fact that he had allowed his mother to die caused him to give up arms and become a hermit.⁸

This episode not only reveals the ambivalence about the relationship between mother and adult child in Carolingian controlled lands in the eighth to early tenth centuries, but also highlights the great difficulties in understanding female old age in this particular era. Naturally a semi-legendary episode relates far more about expectations and perceptions than about any sort of historical reality. Furthermore, Ermold placed this anecdote in his poem to offer a counterexample of a good leader, not to comment specifically on old age. In these two respects, this episode is typical of the evidence for female old age in the Carolingian world. Frequently idealized, didactic, and non-specific, the extant references to old women suggest the ways early medieval people understood the social position of old women. Datus realized only too late that he loved his mother or at least regretted his complicity in her death. The episode relates a reverse model: laymen ought not to behave like Datus who loved worldly goods and specifically his horse so much that he allowed a defenseless kinswoman to die. Datus's mother functions in the tale as a figure who allows the poet to make his point; she does not even have her own name. Ermold also never specifically refers to Datus' mother as old, nor does he explain precisely why Datus may have valued his horse more than the woman who gave birth to him. Yet evidence from other Carolingian texts suggests that Datus may not have been unusual for initially believing his horse to be more valuable than a woman whose childbearing years presumably were past. Datus may, therefore, have believed that she had no further roles to carry out within their family, and may not have appreciated any immediate value she had for him or others.

⁶ Ibid., 24–26, lines 254–75.

⁷ Ibid., 26, lines 277–79.

⁸ Ibid., 26, lines 280–91. Datus's speech and this episode are reminiscent of Clotild's decision, made in a moment of anger, fear, and grief, that she preferred her grandsons be murdered than have their hair cut, which in Merovingian culture would have rendered them unfit to rule. Gregory of Tours, *Liber historiarum*, ed. Bruno Krusch and Wilhelm Levison. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum*, 1.1 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1937), Book 3, Ch. 18, 118.

The difficulty of determining what constituted old age applies to nearly all times and places, but the paucity and types of sources from the early Middle Ages compounds this problem. Medievalists have approached old age from at least three angles. One is to understand, as Shulamith Shahar expressed it, the role of the elderly in the "symbolic order of the world."⁹ While the topic of senescence in the Carolingian world has, for example, received ample attention, the relevant texts associate this idea of the world growing old with men, especially rulers, rather than women.¹⁰ Historians have focused far more on old men in Carolingian lands than on their female counterparts. Broad studies of Carolingian society pay practically no attention to old age *per se*, while early medieval studies of women tend to focus on dowagers and widows more generally, perhaps in part because of the difficulty in determining when a woman was old.¹¹ Yet, I will argue in this article that, despite significant obstacles to obtaining clear results, anecdotal evidence from hagiography, monastic rules, annals, histories, and other texts can provide glimpses into the roles of old women in Carolingian society. Before examining that anecdotal evidence, I will first examine the ways in which it is possible to mine a variety of sources for useful data. Because that remaining evidence is too sparse to provide a firm definition of female old age, I will then explore textual references to old women in order to understand their perception in Carolingian lands.

Old women do not seem to have served as particular markers of certain ideas in the Carolingian world in the same way that the *senex* conveyed specific

⁹ Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: 'Winter clothes us in shadow and pain'*, trans. Yael Lotan (1995; London: Routledge, 1997), 1.

¹⁰ Paul Edward Dutton, "Beyond the Topos of Senescence: the Political Problems of aged Carolingian Rulers," *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 75–94; Paul Edward Dutton, "A World Grown Old With Kings and Poets," *Charlemagne's Mustache and Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 151–67. For late-medieval views, see: Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 36–59.

¹¹ The most extensive work on old women in the early Middle Ages is the chapter on dowagers in Pauline Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers: the King's wife in the early Middle Ages* (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1983), 143–90. Among works on early medieval women that discuss widows and dowagers, though not female old age *per se*, are Suzanne Fonay Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society: Marriage and the cloister 500 to 900* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981); Isabelle Réal, *Vies de saints, vie de famille. Représentation et système de la parenté dans le Royaume mérovingien (481–751) d'après les sources hagiographiques* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001); Lisa Bitel, *Women in Early Medieval Europe, 400–1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Among some general works that do not address female old age are Pierre Riché, *Daily Life in the World of Charlemagne*, trans. Jo Ann McNamara (1973; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978); Pierre Riché, *The Carolingians: a Family who forged Europe*, trans. Michael Idomir Allen (1983; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); Roger Collins, *Early Medieval Europe, 300–1000* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991); Johannes Laudage, Lars Hageneier, and Yvonne Leiverkus, *Die Zeit der Karolinger* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006).

meanings, especially in poetry. Rather, two other approaches prove more fruitful in identifying what constituted female old age in the Carolingian era. The first is a demographic or biological approach, focused on finding out how long a woman could expect to live in this period and the possible reasons for that longevity. The obstacles to obtaining clear results with such a methodology help to explain why few have taken the second approach—examining how others expected old women to function in society.¹²

Arriving at a precise historical understanding of female old age, much less women's average life expectancy, has proven difficult.¹³ Prior to the nineteenth century, women's ages at death were not recorded as often as those of men in Europe.¹⁴ Most early medieval people probably did not know exactly how old they were.¹⁵ Late antique and early medieval writers did not provide specific definitions of old age for women. In his *De cultu feminarum* Tertullian (160–220) associated old women with vanity, criticizing the folly of their attempts to dye their white hair black or blonde: “Senectus cum plus occultari studuerit, plus detegetur”¹⁶ (The more old age takes pains to conceal itself, the more it will be revealed).

Tertullian faulted Roman women for the ways they adorned themselves, drawing from Stoic rhetoric on sober dress and the Hebrew scriptures' equation of external dress and interior demeanor.¹⁷ Loss of beauty or desirable physical characteristics must have been a serious concern for women as they aged. Presumably the Roman women Tertullian criticized took care to dress well and maintain their personal beauty in order to fulfill their traditional roles among the elite. Not only might beauty attract a husband, but it could also imply the fertility that ideally came with youth. Although the association of old women and vanity is not prominent in Carolingian texts, the connection between aging and loss of fertility continued to shape the ways men in Carolingian lands thought about women.

The paradigm of the ages of man, adopted from classical antiquity, usually applied more to men than to women, and medieval theologians and writers linked

¹² The old as an “actual component of society” was another way medieval people often understood old age. Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 1.

¹³ The historical study of old women is relatively new. For an early consideration, see Peter N. Stearns, “Old Women: Some historical Observations,” *Journal of Family History* 5 (1980): 44–57.

¹⁴ Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past experiences, present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21.

¹⁵ Julia M. H. Smith, *Europe After Rome: a New cultural History, 500–1000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 60.

¹⁶ Tertullian, *De cultu feminarum*. Sources chrétiennes, 173 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1971), Book 2, Ch. 6, 120 (here and throughout, only Book and Chapter will be identified, the subsequent number/s represent the page number/s).

¹⁷ Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 36.

it to various models of nature, history, and time.¹⁸ In his *De universo* of 842–846, Hrabanus Maurus, however, discussed women throughout his explanation of the ages of man. Viewing their ability to reason and to control their sexual urges with substantial suspicion, he quoted many Biblical passages to support these views.¹⁹ For Hrabanus, women appear to have been the inferior embodiment of each particular age he discussed. Although he therefore applied the ages of man to women, he implied that they are not consistent with its standards of measurement. Furthermore, his examples have little to do with the most obvious signs of aging among women: the advent and end of their ability to bear children. He comes much closer to a gendered understanding of female aging and its repercussions in his commentary on the third chapter of *Ecclesiastes*:

Pulchra mulier, quae adolescentulorum post se trahebat greges, arata fronte contrahitur: et quae prius amori, postea fastidio est. Quod et egregius apud Graecos scribit orator speciem corporis aut tempore deficere aut languore consumi.”

[“The beautiful woman, who attracts bands of adolescents, her countenance will be drawn into furrows: and first she is regarded with love, afterwards with disgust. For the orator preeminent among the Greeks writes that the beauty of the body is destroyed by time and consumed by listlessness.”]²⁰

Because a woman’s lovely appearance could attract men and serve as a marker of male status among the elite, the loss of a woman’s youthful beauty served as a visible reminder of her passing years. This passage furthermore underlines the narrow ways in which some clerics, like Hrabanus, understood women’s relationship to men.²¹

The age at which a woman became old is rather unclear. Similarly, views varied on the age at which a man reached the final stage, when he became a *senex*.²² In his *Etymologies*, Isidore of Seville (560–636) wrote that *anus* is the word for an old woman, deriving from her many years (*annis*).²³ In *De universo*, Hrabanus Maurus

¹⁸ J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: a Study in medieval writing and thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 2, 5, and 55; Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval interpretations of the life cycle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 54–71, 80–90.

¹⁹ Hrabanus Maurus, *De universo*. PL 111, Book 1, Ch. 1, 179–85.

²⁰ Hrabanus Maurus, *Commentarius in Ecclesiastes*, PL 109, 858.

²¹ The emphasis Hrabanus places upon the loss of youthful beauty recalls the vivid descriptions of the decrepitude of the aged in the early modern texts Alison Coudert employs in her essay in this volume.

²² Georges Minois, *History of Old Age: from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (1987; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 5; Sears, *The Ages of Man*, 9–10. Throughout the Middle Ages, paradigms for the ages of man varied in complexity and details as the essays by Juanita Ruys and Scott L. Taylor, among others in this volume, demonstrate.

²³ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum sive originum*, vol. 2, ed. W. M. Lindsay (1911; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), Book 11, Ch. 2, Num. 28.

wrote simply: "Senex autem tantum masculini generis est, sicut anus feminini"²⁴ ("As *senex* is of the masculine kind, so *anus* is of the feminine").

These vague statements do not even hint at a specific age past which others believed a woman was old, nor do they suggest much about female life expectancy. From a modern vantage, historians find it difficult to measure the relative life expectancies of men and women prior to the early modern period in Europe.²⁵ Late antique epigraphs from Roman cemeteries suggest that men regularly outlived women by four to seven years.²⁶ Ninth-century data from polyptychs also indicate that men may have outnumbered women and possibly lived longer than they did, but the variety of possible explanations for this discrepancy makes uncertain all generalizations about the female versus the male lifespan and the number of men compared to women in the early Middle Ages.²⁷ Given the prevalence of disease, accidents, problems in childbirth, anemia, and relatively hard living conditions, aristocratic women could easily have died at most points of their life cycle, though early childhood and the years of childbearing posed the greatest dangers to their health. Presumably women at religious communities, who bore no children and who sometimes had a more dependable food supply, lived longer on average than laywomen. The death of the ninth-century abbess of Gandersheim, Hathumoda, in an epidemic, nonetheless, demonstrates that religious women fell prey to some of the same dangers as their lay counterparts.²⁸ Unfortunately, the two Carolingian memorial books that

²⁴ Hrabanus Maurus, *De universo*, Book 7, Ch. 1, 185.

²⁵ Margaret Pelling and Richard M. Smith, "Introduction," *Life, Death, and the Elderly: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Margaret Pelling and Richard M. Smith (London: Routledge, 1991), 1–38; here 10–11.

²⁶ David Herlihy, "The Natural History of Medieval Women," *Women, Family and Society in Medieval Europe: Historical Essays, 1978–1991*, ed. A. Molho (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995), 57–68; here 59–60. Although funeral monuments may seem a potentially biased form of evidence, a relatively broad cross section of the Roman population erected lasting monuments to the dead.

²⁷ Polyptychs recorded mainly individuals of low status. Among the possible explanations for the difference in numbers of men and women in these inventories are death from a life of hard work and complications related to childbirth (David Herlihy, "Life Expectancies for Women in Medieval Society," *The Role of Women in the Middle Ages: Papers of the sixth annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies State University of New York at Binghamton 6–7 May 1972*, ed. Rosmarie Thee Morewedge (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 1–22; here 4–10); female infanticide (Emily Coleman, "Infanticide in the Early Middle Ages," *Women in Medieval Society*, ed. Susan Mosher Stuard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), 47–70); women's absence because they are working at a *gynaeceum* (David Herlihy, *Opera Muliebria: Women and work in medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 86); and the possibility that women were not counted as carefully as men (Herlihy, "The Natural History of Medieval Women," 60). Evidence is much firmer for the longer life spans of women from the thirteenth century on (Herlihy, "The Natural History of Medieval Women," 61).

²⁸ Agius, *Vita Hathumodae*. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores*, 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1841), 166–75; here Ch. 22, 173. For a recent discussion of this *vita*, see Thomas Schilp, "Die Vita Hathumodae, der ersten Äbtissin der Frauenkommunität Gandersheims (852–874):

survive from female monasteries at Remiremont and San Salvatore in Brescia do not provide sufficient information for a demographic study of women in the religious life.²⁹

Measuring life expectancy and age at death for royal women has, however, been possible. Elite lay women in the early medieval world could live as long as their male counterparts. Many aristocratic women in the early Middle Ages lived to 60 or 70, an age at which many kings died naturally.³⁰ For Carolingian queens, the average age of death was probably around 35, with an average life expectancy of 40.5 after very early childhood, but the high rate of death for all young children and the increased risks of death during childbearing years pull these averages down.³¹ The relative lack of iron in the early medieval diet meant that the critical need for this mineral among pregnant and nursing mothers went unmet, and many early medieval lay women probably had severe anemia that left them more susceptible to death in the form of disease and injury.³² Many common women also worked hard physically, especially on farms, which may have contributed to their relatively early deaths.³³ Cemetery evidence from Wenigumstadt in Germany suggests that individuals over 60 were probably only a small percentage of the

Lebensform im Spannungsfeld von Norm und Wirklichkeit," *Fromme Frauen – unbequeme Frauen?: Weibliches Religiosentum im Mittelalter*, ed. Edeltraud Klueting. Hildesheimer Forschungen. Tagungs- und Forschungsberichte aus der Dombibliothek Hildesheim, 3 (Hildesheim, Zürich, and New York:

Georg Olms, 2006), 1-25.

²⁹ The memorial book from Remiremont contains necrologies that might help with a relative date of death, but it contains no clear information on the women's entry into the religious life as is found in the memorial book from San Salvatore in Brescia, which contains an oblation list but no necrologies of the nuns alone. *Liber Memorialis von Remiremont*, ed. Eduard Hlawitschka, Karl Schmid, and Gerd Tellenbach, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Libri Memoriales*, 1 (Zurich: Weidmann, 1970); *Der Memorial- und Liturgiecodex von San Salvatore/Santa Giulia in Brescia*, ed. Dieter Geuenich and Uwe Ludwig, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Libri Memoriales et Necrologia*, Nova Series, 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2000).

³⁰ Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*, 144-45.

³¹ Because records of women's birth and death dates usually resulted from their connection to the royal court, sources provide birth dates for princesses born into the royal family and death dates for queens, who married into the royal family. The small sample resulting from this situation makes conclusive statements impossible. Dutton, "A World Grown Old With Kings and Poets," 158-59 and Appendix 3, especially 197-98. See also Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, Appendix, 199-201.

³² Vern Bullough and Cameron Campbell, "Female Longevity and Diet in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 55.2 (1980): 317-25.

³³ Herlihy, "Life Expectancies for Women in Medieval Society," 10. On women's labor see: Ludolf Kuchenbuch, "Trennung und Verbindung im bauerlichen Werken des 9. Jahrhunderts. Eine Auseinandersetzung mit Ivan Illichs Genus-Konzept," *Frauen in der Geschichte VII. Interdisziplinäre Studien zur Geschichte der Frauen im Frühmittelalter. Methoden – Probleme – Ergebnisse*, ed. Werner Affeldt and Annette Kuhn (Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1986), 227-42; Monika Obermeier, "Ancilla:" *Beiträge zur Geschichte der unfreien Frauen im Frühmittelalter* (Pfaffenweiler: Centaurus Verlagsgesellschaft, 1996), 166-232.

population from ca. 400–ca. 800.³⁴ Local conditions meant, however, that female and male life expectancy could vary considerably over time and place.³⁵ For example, though Martina Hartmann accounted for around 4500 skeletal remains at more than 40 Merovingian cemeteries, she noted that variations among the sites made generalization difficult. Her evidence, nevertheless, indicated that women often died between 25 and 40, the period during which they were most often subject to the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth, but once they reached 40 their life expectancy began to equal that of men.³⁶ Similar results came from the excavation of the ninth- to eleventh-century cemetery of Münsterhof in Zurich, where women's life expectancy remained lower than that of men from their teenage years until the age of about 60 when life expectancy for men and women evened out: the significant dangers of childbirth account for this discrepancy, especially as by age 40 the gap began to close.³⁷

Despite the ailments and dangers that women faced, both elite and non-elite women in the early Middle Ages could survive into their 60s and sometimes 70s; the relative lack of information about old women results more from the nature of the sources and Carolingian views of old women than from their high death rates earlier in life from problems related to childbearing. The aged need not have been "mainly men."³⁸

Measuring old age on the basis of having reached a certain age is highly problematic even in the case of men. Medieval people recognized that aging could be a gradual and individual process.³⁹ What constituted old age for women in the Carolingian world related far more to social, familial, and individual circumstances than reaching a specific birthday. Carolingian writers, for example, associated agedness with illness. Though this connection related to the trope of senescence, these men drew upon their own experiences in explaining the poor health that often came with increased age.⁴⁰ In relation to female health, the loss

³⁴ M. Cipriano-Bechtle, G. Grupe, and P. Schroeter, "Ageing and Life Expectancy in the Early Middle Ages," *Homo* 46.3 (1996): 267–79.

³⁵ Smith, *Europe After Rome*, 66–68.

³⁶ Martina Hartmann, *Aufbruch ins Mittelalter. Die Zeit der Merowinger* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2003), 194–96. See also the discussion of this site and other archeological evidence on old age in Albrecht Classen's introduction to this volume.

³⁷ Hansueli Etter, "Die Bevölkerung von Münsterhof," *Der Münsterhof in Zürich: Bericht über die vom städtischen Büro für Archäologie durchgeführten Stadtkernforschungen 1977–78*, vol. 2, ed. Jürg Schneider, Daniel Gutscher, Hansueli Etter, and Jürg Hanser. Schweizer Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte und Archäologie des Mittelalters, 9 (Olten and Freiburg i. Br.: Walter-Verlag, 1982), 179–212; here 188.

³⁸ Minois, *History of Old Age: from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, 149.

³⁹ Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 12–13.

⁴⁰ Dutton, "Beyond the Topos of Senescence: the Political problems of aged Carolingian rulers," 77–78; Dutton, "A World Grown Old With Kings and Poets," 153–54. In this regard they may have drawn from the ideas of Gregory the Great (590–604) who associated old age with illness. Minois, *History*

of fertility marked a new stage in life for lay women. Many aristocratic women had children at rather young ages; miscarriages, still births, and other complications from pregnancy and childbirth must have taken their toll, rendering medieval women infertile at younger ages than women in the modern era.⁴¹ According to the late eighth-century *Vienna Penitential B* (Cod. lat. 2233, ff. 1'–82'), which drew from the penitential of Finnean, one reason that men ought not be allowed to set aside sterile wives was the possibility that they might eventually conceive: Sarah, Rebecca, Anna, and Elizabeth had all conceived and borne their children late in life, demonstrating biblical precedent for such events.⁴² Nevertheless, the births of Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Samuel, and John the Baptist were miraculous for being so unlikely. Women in the Carolingian world could hardly expect to remain fertile as they aged. The ages later medieval medical authorities maintained for the onset of menopause suggest that Carolingian women most often may have reached menopause from ages 40 to 50.⁴³

Early medieval law codes suggest that infertile women, especially older ones, could lose social and legal status as a result of their inability to bear children. Visigothic law forbade older women (*maiores femine*) from marrying young men (*virii minori*). Not only were such unions unlikely to produce children, but also they inverted the natural order by enabling such women to command their young husbands.⁴⁴ Salic law stipulated that the *wergeld* for a fertile woman be three times higher than that for a woman past her childbearing years or past 60.⁴⁵ Since loss of fertility often came with increased age and ill health, that law may also reflect the diminished work capacity of such women in comparison to their younger counterparts.⁴⁶ When referring to an early medieval woman as old, therefore, I use the term in relative, not precise terms.

of *Old Age: from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, 116.

⁴¹ Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 19.

⁴² The manuscript was produced at Salzburg. *Paenitentiale Vindobonense B*, in Rob Meens, *Het Tripartite Boeteboek. Overlevering en betekenis van vroegmiddeleeuwse vlechtvoorschriften (met editie en vertaling van vier tripartita* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1994), 354–432; here 388; see also 105–14. Hubertus Lutterbach, *Sexualität im Mittelalter. Eine Kulturstudie anhand von Bußbüchern des 6. bis 12. Jahrhunderts*. Beihefte zum Archiv für Kulturgeschichte, 43 (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1999), 125–27.

⁴³ J. B. Post, "Ages at Menarche and Menopause: Some Mediaeval Authorities," *Population Studies* 25.1 (1971): 83–87.

⁴⁴ *Leges Visigothorum antiquiores*, ed. Karl Zeumer. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Fontes iuris Germanici*, 5 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1894), Book 3, Ch. 1, Law 4, 88.

⁴⁵ The wergeld of the fertile free woman was 600 *solidi* rather than 200 *solidi* for a free woman incapable of bearing children. *Pactus legis Salicae*, ed. Karl August Eckhardt. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Leges nationum Germanicarum*, 4.1 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1962), here respectively 92, 160, 235. See also *The Laws of the Salian Franks*, trans. and ed. Katherine Fischer Drew (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), for *Pactus legis Salicae* Book 24, laws 8–9; Book 41, laws 15, 17, and 19, p. 45.

⁴⁶ Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 6.

Women in the religious life highlight the impossibility of being exact about female old age in the Carolingian world. Fertility was often not an issue for them, making measurement of their old age more difficult than for lay women. At least following the Council of Aachen of 816, female religious houses in Carolingian lands had to choose to follow either the *Rule of St. Benedict* or the *Institutio sanctimonialium Aquisgranensis*, formulated at that same council. Benedict had made allowances for the elderly in his *Rule*, though he argued that age should play no role in rank within a monastery.⁴⁷ The *Institutio sanctimonialium* was more explicit about care for the old, explaining that the abbess must ensure special care for them, and that the sisters who tended the old be merciful and compassionate in carrying out their duties in this regard.⁴⁸ Within monastic communities members recognized the aged as a group with greater needs than other adult members, but additional textual sources such as hagiography, historical works, and charters allow for examination of the social functions and expectations of all old women by sometimes explicitly or implicitly revealing their activities.

Many old women were widows. In Carolingian lands, all wives could become widows at all points of their adult lives. Accidental deaths were common in the Middle Ages, and aristocratic and royal men's participation in hunting and warfare meant that they were almost certainly at higher risk of such deaths than their female counterparts. Widows hardly comprised a homogenous group in terms of age or status. They appear, however, to have had more freedom than other aristocratic women to dispose of their property and possessions as they wished.⁴⁹ Of course, they still had to rely heavily upon men for support in carrying out these decisions.⁵⁰ At an assembly in Luxembourg in 853, the widow Erkanfrida took care to ensure that she had aristocratic male support for the disposition of possessions and land in her will.⁵¹ According to Hucbald of St. Amand in his *vita* of the aristocratic widow Rictrud, written ca. 907, Rictrud had to trick the king, Dagobert, into giving his permission for her to take the veil: he wanted her to

⁴⁷ *Regula Benedicti. La Règle de Saint Benoît. Sources Chrétiennes*, 181–82, ed. Adalbert de Vogüé and Jean Neufville (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1972), Ch. 37, 572.

⁴⁸ *Institutio sanctimonialium Aquisgranensis*, ed. Albert Werminghoff. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Concilia Germaniae*, 2.1 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1908), 421–56; here Ch. 23, 454.

⁴⁹ Julia Crick, "Men, Women, and Widows: Widowhood in pre-Conquest England," *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner. *Women and Men in History* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Ltd., 1999), 24–36; here 29.

⁵⁰ Patricia Skinner, "The Widow's Options in Medieval Southern Italy," *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 57–65; here 63–64; Stephanie Hollis, "'The Protection of God and the King': Wulfstan's Legislation on Widows," *Wulfstan, Archbishop of York: the Proceedings of the Second Alcuin Conference*, ed. Matthew Townend. *Studies in the Early Middle Ages*, 10 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 443–60; here 447–48.

⁵¹ Janet L. Nelson, "The Wary Widow," *Property and Power in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Wendy Davies and Paul Fouracre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 82–113; here 108–10.

marry one of his followers rather than take her riches into a religious community.⁵² This episode reflects the real situations of the many medieval widows who had to deal with profound external pressures either to remarry, if they were still below a certain age, or to enter a religious community.⁵³ Ideally widows were meant either to enter the monastic cloister or to become *deo sacrata*, dedicated to a chaste life in service of God even if they did not enter a religious house.⁵⁴

Some Carolingian widows joined convents, where they brought to bear their experiences running households to improve the administration of their new communities.⁵⁵ The social competence that they had learned in the secular world served them well in the religious life. The older sisters in a convent usually held the offices. The early anonymous version of the *Vita Aldegundis* survives in a ninth-century Carolingian manuscript (BNF lat. 05275) among others; in that particular version the author mentions that the abbess Aldegund instructed the older sisters (*seniores germanas*), who usually carried out the administrative tasks for the community.⁵⁶ Curiously, the manuscripts that contain the early tenth-century version of her *vita*, once erroneously ascribed to Hucbald of St. Amand, consistently leave out the part about these sisters being senior.⁵⁷ Perhaps the

⁵² *Vita Rictrudis*. AASS Mai III, Ch. 14, 79–89; here 84. Rictrud was relatively young when widowed, but her *vita* served as a model to other widows, especially those who had entered the religious life at Marchiennes, the community for which Hucbald wrote his *vita*. Julia Smith, "A Hagiographer at Work: Hucbald and the library at Saint-Amand," *Revue bénédictine* 106 (1996), 151–71; Julia M. H. Smith, "The Hagiography of Hucbald of Saint-Amand," *Studi medievali* 35, series 3 (1994): 517–42; Julia M. H. Smith, "The Problem of Female Sanctity in Carolingian Europe c.780–920," *Past and Present* 146 (1995): 3–37.

⁵³ Michel Parisse, "Des veuves au monastère," *Veuves et veuvage dans le haut Moyen Âge*, ed. Michel Parisse (Paris: Picard, 1993), 255–77; here 256–63. Although legislation often stipulated the rights of widows to remarry or not as they wished and to dispose of their property as they wanted so long as their children's rights remained intact, authorities rarely enforced these laws until the thirteenth century. Such legislation had existed since late antiquity when Roman widows received the right to retain their own tutelage. Actual practice, however, took some time to begin to conform to these normative pronouncements, and even when widows had more dependable rights, they could still at times suffer from great external pressures concerning their decisions about remarriage and disposal of property. Rowena Archer, "Rich Old Ladies: The Problem of Late Medieval Dowagers," *Property and Politics: Essays in Later Medieval English History*, ed. Tony Pollard (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1984), 15–35; here 16–8; Frantz Pellaton, "La veuve et ses droits de la Basse-Antiquité au haut Moyen Âge," 51–97; here 94–95; Emmanuelle Santinelli, *Des femmes éplorées? Les veuves dans la société aristocratique du haut Moyen Âge* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du septentrion, 2003), 179, 263–64.

⁵⁴ Nelson, "The Wary Widow," 190; Emmanuelle Santinelli, *Des femmes éplorées?*, 165–67.

⁵⁵ Parisse, "Des veuves au monastère," 269; Emmanuelle Santinelli, *Des femmes éplorées?*, 183–87.

⁵⁶ BNF lat. 5275, f. 49^v. See also *Vita Aldegundis*, AASS, January, v. 2 (Antwerp: Société des Bollandistes, 1643), 1035–40; here Ch. 19, 1038; in this edition the characteristic of "senior" is absent: "Nec multu post tempore dum ambae sorores curam sibi commissi gregis gererent."

⁵⁷ The passage appears in BNF lat. 5371, folio 150^r, 1st column; BNF lat. 11108, folio 60^r; Bibliothèque Municipale de Saint-Omer 724, f. 163^v first column; Bibliothèque Municipale, Arras 567 f. 59^v second

author assumed his readers would understand that these women had reached a mature age and simply left off what might have seemed a superfluous detail, or he might have wanted to emphasize that virtue, not age, should dictate who held monastic offices. That same tenth-century author, however, emphasizes the age of a nun who saw a vision. In both the ninth- and tenth-century versions of her *vita*, the abbess Aldegund appeared in a nun's vision breaking mass offerings into a chalice at an altar. In the vision Aldegund told the nun that because she was ill, the nun must tell the priest to give her communion. The early tenth-century writer provides an additional detail missing in the ninth-century manuscript version: he notes that this woman was "una de maturioribus ancillis" ["one of the mature nuns"].⁵⁸ The surprising scene of a woman performing the actions of a priest at the altar may have called the reliability of the witness into question. By emphasizing her mature age, the author hoped to demonstrate the veracity of the tale. These examples from the *Vita Aldegundis* suggest that women in the religious life respected the experience and maturity of their older sisters.

In addition to their possible contributions to their spiritual families, early and high medieval widows commemorated deceased kin and doubtless maintained connections with their children and other relatives and thus had communication with the outside world.⁵⁹ Besides their interest in their children's welfare, many widows who had to look after lands of which they had usufruct, would necessarily have had contact with relatives concerning their holdings. Thus, their bonds with their families may have been stronger or more flexible than those of the virgins in religious communities.⁶⁰

While some Carolingian widowed queens entered religious houses, others continued to be active in political life while remaining in the lay world, often as *deo sacrata*. Based on other early medieval queens who acted as powerful regents, one might expect that Carolingian queens also played that role, but Carolingian rulers left behind few young heirs.⁶¹ Those circumstances often left widowed queens in potentially precarious situations if they wanted to continue to exert political influence.⁶² Widowed queens, however, played other prominent roles in the

column; Bibliothèque Municipale, Arras 569 f. 56^v first column. See also *Vita Aldegundis*. AASS, January, v. 2 (Antwerp: Société des Bollandistes, 1643), Ch. 19, 1040–47; here 1044 and *Vita Aldegundis*. PL 132, Ch. 19, col. 869.

⁵⁸ Compare BNF lat. 5275, f. 50^r–50^v to *Vita Aldegundis*. AASS, January v. 2, 1046; *Vita Aldegundis*, 31, PL 132, Ch. 31, 874.

⁵⁹ Eva Parra Membrives, "Mutterliebe aus weiblicher Perspektive," *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: the Results of a Paradigm Shift in the History of Mentality*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2005), 87–103; here 91–94; Emmanuelle Santinelli, *Des femmes éplorées?*, 293, 317–19.

⁶⁰ Parisse, "Des veuves au monastère," 266.

⁶¹ Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*, 156.

⁶² Simon MacLean, "Queenship, Nunneries and Royal Widowhood in Carolingian Europe," *Past and*

political sphere, often affecting marriage negotiations, the selection and designation of heirs, and advancing family influence through control of land. During the early part of Charlemagne's reign, from 768–771, when he shared rule with his brother Carloman, Charlemagne's mother Bertha worked to keep peace between her two sons.⁶³ Arranging the marriage of Charlemagne to an unnamed daughter of the Lombard king Desiderius (757–774) was a means either to retain a balance of power between the two kings or to help Charlemagne to isolate Carloman politically. The marriage alliance also served to prevent a strong challenge to Charlemagne from his cousin Tassilo of Bavaria, married to another of Desiderius's daughters, Liutperga. When his brother Carloman died on 6 December 771, however, the exigency for the marriage passed, and Charlemagne set aside his Lombard partner.⁶⁴ Bertha spent her old age at her son's court, where he treated her "cum summa reverentia."⁶⁵ ["with the greatest respect"]

Other royal widows and queen mothers could exert substantial influence over politics following their husbands' deaths.⁶⁶ In 877, for example, Charles the Bald called his childless second wife back to him because he lay on his deathbed.⁶⁷ He entrusted to Richildis the royal regalia, including a sword with which she was to invest Louis the Stammerer with his father's realm as well as a robe, crown and scepter. After some negotiation, she transferred these items to her stepson.⁶⁸ Frankish queens had long had access to the royal treasure, and their possession of that treasure following the deaths of their husbands gave them prestige and power at a moment when their influence often began to diminish.⁶⁹ As the bearer of royal

Present 178 (2003): 1–38; here 6–7.

⁶³ Einhard, *Vita Karoli*, ed. G. Waitz. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum*, 25 (1911; Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1991), Ch. 18, 22.

⁶⁴ Janet L. Nelson, "Making a Difference in Eighth-Century Politics: the Daughters of Desiderius," *After Rome's Fall: Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History: Essays Presented to Walter Goffart*, ed. Alexander Callander Murray (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 171–90; here 177–86. Unlike the many meddling old women of later medieval literature, discussed in this volume by Karen Pratt and Connie Scarborough, Carolingian texts offer no examples of old women acting as go-betweens or matchmakers for lovers.

⁶⁵ Einhard, *Vita Karoli*, Ch. 18, 23.

⁶⁶ MacLean, "Queenship, Nunneries and Royal Widowhood in Carolingian Europe;" Charles E. Odegaard, "The Empress Engelberge," *Speculum* 26.1 (1951): 77–103; Elizabeth Ward, "Caesar's Wife: the Career of the Empress Judith, 819–29," *Charlemagne's Heir: New perspectives on the reign of Louis the Pious (814–40)*, ed. Peter Godman and Roger Collins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 205–27.

⁶⁷ Richildis had accompanied her husband Charles the Bald to Italy, where, at Tortona, Pope John had consecrated her empress. Upon finding out that Karlmann, son of Louis the German, was about to attack them, Richildis had fled northward taking the rich treasure the royal couple had brought with them across the Alps. *Annales Bertiniani* (year 877), *Annales de Saint-Bertin*, ed. Felix Grat, Jeanne Vielliard, and Suzanne Clémencet (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1964), 214–16.

⁶⁸ *Annales Bertiniani* (year 877), 218–19.

⁶⁹ For the role of queen in the finances of the court, see Hincmar of Rheims, *De ordine palatii*. ed. Thomas Gross and Rudolf Schieffer. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Fontes*, 3 (Hanover: Hahnsche

treasure Richildis was able to delay delivery of the regalia to her stepson, demonstrating that she could exert influence over the transmission of royal authority. When Louis the Stammerer died in 879, Ansgard, the wife whom he had set aside to marry Adelaide in 876, succeeded in promoting her sons, Louis and Carloman, as his heirs because her powerful family was able to back her claims. Adelaide subsequently fled with her son, the future Charles the Simple, to her own family, who helped her in the 890s to press her son's claims to the throne.⁷⁰ Without an heir who could exert his authority and gain supporters, royal widows often faded into obscurity.

Some non-royal widows in the religious life acted as mentors to their grandchildren or provided them with valuable connections. In Hucbald's *Vita Rictrudis*, for example, Gertrude, the grandmother of Rictrud's husband Adalbald, raised the couple's daughter Eusebia at her religious house at Hamay. Upon Gertrude's death Eusebia became abbess of Hamay at the age of twelve.⁷¹ In Liudger's *Vita Gregorii abbatis*, written sometime just after 800, the great Anglo-Saxon missionary Boniface first met Gregory, future bishop of Utrecht, on a visit to Pfulzel, where Addula, Gregory's grandmother, was abbess. Sitting around a table, Boniface, Addula, her *familia*, which included Gregory, and presumably some of Boniface's followers discussed Scripture. When they needed a reader, Addula had Gregory read aloud before their famous guest. Although Gregory could not explain the passage when Boniface requested that he do so, Boniface nevertheless found his reading remarkable, and Gregory's amazement at Boniface's subsequent exegesis caused him to beg Addula to let him follow Boniface as his student.⁷² Since she did not know Boniface well, much less where he was going, she refused. Stubbornly, Gregory retorted that if she refused to give him a horse, he would simply follow Boniface on foot. Addula finally agreed to give him servants and horses and let him accompany Boniface.⁷³

Buchhandlung, 1980), Ch. 22, 72–74. For the history of female control of royal treasure, see Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dots*, 104–06; Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 63–69.

⁷⁰ Regino of Prüm, *Chronicon*, ed. Friedrich Kurze. Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum, 50 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1890), years 878–79, 892, 114 and 141. See also Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*, 160; Janet L. Nelson, trans. *Annals of St. Bertin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 210, note 14, 216, note 5.

⁷¹ Hucbald of St. Amand, *Vita sanctae Rictrudis*, Ch. 25, 87. A separate anonymous *vita* of Eusebia, likely from the first half of the tenth century, also contains this information. *Vita sanctae Eusebiae abbatissa Hammaticensi*, Ch. 7–10, AASS March, vol. 2, 452–55; here 453–54. This later *vita* is probably based upon Hucbald's *Vita Rictrudis*. L. van der Essen, *Etude critique et littéraire sur les vitæ des saints mérovingiens de l'ancienne Belgique* (Louvain: Bureaux du Recueil, 1907), 265–68.

⁷² Liudger, *Vita Gregorii abbatis*, ed. Oswald Holder-Egger. Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores, 15.1 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1887), Ch. 2, 63–79; here 67–68.

⁷³ "Ipsa vero famula Dei Addula, quia prudens erat femina, videns inflexibilem animum pueri, dedit illi pueros et equos et dimisit eum ire cum sancto magistro . . .," *Vita Gregorii abbatis*, Ch. 2, 68.

Liudger praised Gregory for defying the wishes of his kin and urged other young men to follow his example, but given her earlier actions, Addula's protest seems to be a didactic element more than anything else. Medieval hagiographers often wrote about the obstacles saints had to overcome to enter the religious life. By having Gregory, rather than another member of her household, read, Addula promoted her grandson before the famous missionary. She acted as Gregory's mentor in this episode, helping him to make a valuable connection, even though the bond created may have been stronger than she had originally hoped.⁷⁴ Her actions parallel the advice the mother Dhuoda gave to her son William concerning his relationships with powerful men at court. Between 841 and 843, Dhuoda wrote a mirror that provided spiritual and practice advice for her adolescent son, then a hostage at the court of Charles the Bald (840–877). While acknowledging William's need to cultivate bonds with magnates and the king, Dhuoda noted the dangers of such interactions, urging William to exercise caution in his treatment of powerful men.⁷⁵ A female relative, such as Addula or Dhuoda, could help young men such as Gregory or William develop valuable bonds with other men; an old woman such as Addula may have been able to draw upon a lifetime's connections. The relative lack of information on grandmothers such as Addula and Gertrude perhaps supports the demographic evidence mentioned above. Einhard noted that Charlemagne's mother Bertha survived long enough to see six of her grandchildren born, but living to their 60s may not have been long enough for some women to play prominent roles in the lives of their grandchildren.⁷⁶ Similarly to Addula and Gertrude, those women who did survive to see their grandchildren reach maturity may have acted as their mentors. Later in the tenth century, the Ottonian queen Mathilda, for example, took a special interest in her grandson Henry, favoring him above her other grandchildren. One of her

⁷⁴ The importance of relationships of patronage and the development of aristocratic bonds has been well established for the Carolingian world. Mayke de Jong, *In Samuel's Image: Child Oblation in the early medieval West* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 214–16; here 216, discusses commendation and fosterage of boys to clerics in hagiography, including Gregory's case, noting that these relationships are depicted as being of an "eminently personal nature." See also Stuart Airlie, *The Political Behaviour of the Secular Magnates in Francia, 829–879*, D. Phil. Dissertation, Oxford 1985, 3–12; id., "Bonds of Power and Bonds of Association in the Court Circle of Louis the Pious," *Charlemagne's Heir: New Perspectives on the Reign of Louis the Pious (814–840)*, ed. Peter Godman and Roger Collins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 191–204; Gerd Althoff, *Family, Friends and Followers: Political and Social Bonds in Early Medieval Europe*, trans. Christopher Carroll (1990; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Gerd Althoff, *Amicitiae und Pacta. Bündnis, Einung, Politik und Gebetsgedenken im beginnenden 10. Jahrhundert*. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Schriften*, 37 (Hanover: Hahn, 1992).

⁷⁵ Dhuoda, *Liber Manualis: Dhuoda. Handbook for her Warrior Son: Liber manualis*, ed. and trans. Marcelle Thiébaux. *Cambridge Medieval Classics*, 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Book 3, Chs. 8–10, 104–16.

⁷⁶ Einhard, *Vita Karoli*, Ch. 18, 23.

biographers depicts her as a loving grandmother, holding the boy while praying for his good health.⁷⁷

An aristocratic Saxon widow named Gisela not only looked after members of her family but also took in a girl who had impressed her at a convent she visited, much as Gregory impressed Boniface. The anonymous mid-ninth-century *Vita Liutbirgae virginis* came from a group of *vitae* associated with the monastery of Fulda that included Liudger's *Vita Gregorii abbatis*; thus it is unsurprising that the two *vitae* should have such similar episodes, clearly inspired by biblical precedent.⁷⁸ Gisela had been traveling to look after her many estates. During her stay at a monastery, one girl stood out to Gisela because of her beauty, character, and talents.⁷⁹ After determining her origin, family, and status, Gisela convinced this girl, Liutberga, to leave the monastery to live with her and be loved as one of her own daughters.⁸⁰ Upon returning with Gisela to Saxony, she helped her patroness with "opera muliebria" ["women's work,"] traveled with her between estates, and looked after the poor.⁸¹ When Gisela died, her son and heir Bernard swore to care for Liutberga and listen to her advice just as his mother asked him to do.⁸² Liutberga became a trusted and indispensable servant. Not only did she aid him in looking after his estates and household matters, but also she had influence over each of his successive wives and helped to look after his children.⁸³ When Liutberga told him she wished to lead a solitary religious life, Bernard had a cell built for her at Windenhausen, where his sister Bilihild was abbess.⁸⁴

⁷⁷ *Vitae Mathildae reginae posterior*, ed. Bernd Schütte. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum in usum scholarum separatim editi*, 66 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 143–202, Ch. 20, 184.

⁷⁸ The episodes recall Jesus's calling of his disciples. Loren J. Samons II, "The *Vita Liutbirgae*," *Classica et Mediaevalia* 43 (1992): 273–86; Ian Wood, *The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of Europe, 400–1050* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 19; on Gregory 107–15. On this *vita*, see also O. Menzel, "Das Leben der Liutbirg," *Sachsen und Anhalt* 13 (1937): 78–89; W. Grosse, "Das Kloster Wendhausen, sein Stiftergeschlecht und seine Klausnerin," *Sachsen und Anhalt* 16 (1940): 45–76; *Das Leben der Liutberg: Die Geschichtschreiber der deutschen Vorzeit*, ed. and trans. E. Witte (Leipzig: Dr. Ernst Wiegandt, 1944); Valerie L. Garver, "Learned Women? Liutberga and the Instruction of Carolingian Women," *Learned Laity in the Carolingian World*, ed. Patrick Wormald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

⁷⁹ "ut virgunculam quandam forma vel ingenio ceteris coetaneis suis" *Vita Liutbirgae. Das Leben der Liutbirg*, ed. Ottokar Menzel. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Deutsches Mittelalter. Kritische Studententexte*, 3 (Leipzig: Verlag Karl W. Hiersemann, 1937), Ch. 3, 12.

⁸⁰ "in pari dilectione filiarum suarum omni tempore secum eam fore permansuram," *Vita Liutbirgae*, Ch. 3, 12.

⁸¹ *Vita Liutbirgae*, Chs. 4–6, 12–14. "muliebris . . . operibus" appears in Chapter 6.

⁸² *Ibid.*, Ch. 7, 14–15.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Chs. 8–10, 15–16.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, Ch. 14, 20; see also Menzel's introduction, 2–3.

Enclosed in her cell, Liutberga spent the next thirty years leading an ascetic life of prayer, instructing girls in textile work and the psalms, and setting an example and caring for those in her community, particularly women. The *Vita Liutbirgae virginis* therefore provides an image of the old age of two women, Gisela and Liutberga. Gisela spent her widowhood caring for the interests of her family, particularly looking after her estates and ensuring that her daughters became abbesses and her son inherited the family lands. Modeling herself upon her patroness, Liutberga then looked after the same family but later entered the spiritual life. From her cell she continued to advise and aid the various people who came to her for help.

Other old women promoted the well-being of their families by looking after family lands and ensuring the commemoration of family members following their deaths. For example, Gisela, the daughter of Louis the Pious and widow of Eberhard of Friuli, must have been a relatively old widow because her children had grown to adulthood before her husband's death. Through donations specifically made to guarantee the burial of Eberhard, herself, and her daughter Ingeltrud and to provide lighting for the community's church and the oratory where they would be buried, Gisela made certain that the family would be remembered at the monastery of Cysoing in Neustria.⁸⁵ The martyrology of Cysoing records Gisela's ensuring that her family members and friends would be remembered at the community. In ca. 874, she had listed her own parents and her brother, the emperor Charles the Bald, as well as her eight children: "Hengeltrude, Hunroc, Berengario, Adelardo, Rodulpho, Hellwich, Gilla, Judich."⁸⁶ Strangely, Eberhard does not appear in the entry. Gisela's careful arrangements for Eberhard's burial there already guaranteed his commemoration, and she may have taken this occasion to emphasize her imperial connections and to provide for the continued memory of her own line.⁸⁷ Gisela pursued a bilateral strategy, commemorating her husband at the same time she ensured that she and her children would be remembered as members of the Carolingian line. The couple had built the monastery in 856 on lands that belonged to Gisela, and thus, this religious house reflected the power and connections that she brought to the marriage. A responsibility among older women for memorial commemoration may not have been uncommon given that many second wives married much older men, and women may have married at a younger age than men.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ *Cartulaire de l'abbaye de Cysoing et de ses dépendances*, ed. I. de Coussemaker (Lille: Impr. Saint-Augustin, 1886), no. 3–6, 7–11.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 6, 11.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 5, 10–11.

⁸⁸ Elisabeth van Houts, *Memory and Gender in Medieval Europe 900–1200* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 149; Stafford, *Queens, Concubines, and Dowagers*, 143–45. See also Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton

Women nevertheless aged and died. Skeletal remains from cemeteries suggest that the elderly could suffer from osteoporosis, arthritis, and spondylitis.⁸⁹ At the cemetery of Münsterhof in Zurich, skeletons indicate that individuals, starting at about age 50, showed clear signs of old age.⁹⁰ Merovingian archeology has revealed that women as young as 30 suffered from osteoporosis, a condition that normally develops following menopause.⁹¹ Sometimes sickness meant that old women and old men required care; Carolingian texts suggest that women were the most frequent caretakers of the ill elderly. The *Institutio sanctimonialium* included the sick and the old in the aforementioned chapter, which stipulated that the sisters look after the infirm and feeble with compassion.

Sed et ceterae sanctimoniales, accessu eas frequenti visitantes, divinarum scripturarum conlocutionibus demulceant et suis facultatibus eis adminiculum praebeant earumque inbecillitates et infirmitates cum caritate aequanimitate portent, ut merito a Domino eis dicatur: *Infirmus fui et visitatis me*, et cetera.”

[And let the other *sanctimoniales*, when they make frequent visits, console [their sick and elderly sisters] with discussions of divine scripture and offer to them the support of their own faculties, and let them kindly bear their helplessness and sickness with charity, so that by that service the Lord may say to them: *I was sick and you visited me*, etc.]⁹²

The act of caring for the elderly and sick demonstrated the virtue of women in the religious life, here specifically following Christ's precepts as found in Matthew 25:36. According to Rudolf's early ninth-century *vita* of Leoba, at her convent of Bischofsheim in Saxony, when a nun Williswind became so ill that the others could not stand her stench, she was taken to her parents' nearby home with full permission.⁹³ This case suggests not only the care that sisters in the religious life were ideally to provide the sick, many of whom were probably old, but also the role families took in caring for their ailing kin. The fact that Williswind's parents could care for her implies that she might have been quite young, but since she had taken vows, her parents must have been at least 35 if not older. Her situation suggests that, in their later years, parents might sometimes care for adult children.

University Press, 1994), 48–80; Matthew Innes, “Keeping it in the Family: Women and Aristocratic Memory, 700–1200,” *Medieval Memories: Men, women and the past, 700–1300*, ed. Elisabeth van Houts (Harlow, England: Longman, 2001), 17–35.

⁸⁹ Smith, *Europe After Rome*, 68–69.

⁹⁰ Hansueli Etter, Daniel Gutscher, and Jürg Schneider, “Leben und Sterben im hochmittelalterlichen Zürich,” *Der Münsterhof in Zürich: Bericht über die vom städtischen Büro für Archäologie durchgeführten Stadtkernforschungen 1977–78*, vol. 1, 166–71; here 167.

⁹¹ Martina Hartmann, *Aufbruch ins Mittelalter*, 196.

⁹² *Institutio sanctimonialium*, Ch. 23, 454.

⁹³ Rudolf, *Vita Leobae Abbatissae Bischofshaimensis*, ed. Georg Waitz. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptorum*, 15.1 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1887), 121–31; here Ch. 15, 128.

The late ninth-century abbess of Gandersheim, Hathumoda looked after the sick in her community.⁹⁴ These actions surely contributed to her premature death during an epidemic, mentioned above. She also looked after her old aunt: "Primo omnium venerabilis amita eius, quamvis iam grandaeva et senio confecta, quantum dolor eam adesse permittebat, ei indefesse assistebat"⁹⁵ ("First among all the venerable was her aunt, then very aged and enfeebled with senility, whose great suffering allowed [Hathumoda] to go to her so that she might aid her indefatigably").

Hathumoda demonstrated her patience and sacrifice in caring for a woman who, because of her senility, may not have appreciated her niece's actions. Rather, Hathumoda's virtue was its own reward. The most famous example of women caring for an elderly relative is surely Charlemagne's daughters who looked after him in his last years.⁹⁶ The great influence they exerted over him and the court may have helped to lead to their exile to the religious life when their brother Louis the Pious became king.⁹⁷

Carolingian sources offer near silence on the approaching death of old women. Hagiography and annals record the deaths of saints and queens, but both types of accounts offer little information on the women's care in their final years, days, and hours. When Leoba fell ill a few days before her death, she had to take to her bed, but Rudolf mentions nothing about those who cared for her.⁹⁸ The late ninth-century *vita* (c. 880) of the sisters Herlindis and Renula provides neither details concerning the manner of their parents' death nor clear information about the care their sisters at Aldeneik surely gave them as each became ill and died.⁹⁹ The author of this *vita*, however, notes that late in their lives, the knowledge of approaching

⁹⁴ Agius, *Vita Hathumodae*, Ch. 10, 170.

⁹⁵ Agius, *Vita Hathumodae*, Ch. 20, 173.

⁹⁶ Charlemagne allowed none of them to marry, keeping them with him until his death. Einhard, *Vita Karoli*, Ch. 19, 25.

⁹⁷ Dutton, "A World Grown Old With Kings and Poets," 165; Janet L. Nelson, "Women at the Court of Charlemagne: a Case of monstrous regiment?," *Medieval Queenship*, ed. John Carmi Parsons (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 43–61; here 59–61.

⁹⁸ "... post paucos dies corporis incommodo correpta, decidit in lectum," Rudolf, *Vita Leobae*, Ch. 21, 130.

⁹⁹ *De sanctis virginibus Herlinde et Reinula seu Renilde abbatissis Masaci in Belgio*. AA SS Martii 3 (Antwerp: Société de Bollandistes, 1668), 385–92; here Ch. 8, 16–19, 387, 389–90. After their deaths in ca. 750, their cult began to develop almost immediately. The translation of their relics to a new church at Aldeneik in 860 almost certainly precipitated the *vita*'s composition. Because of its distance from the lifetimes of its subjects, some have thought the *vita* to be partly if not entirely invented. *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* 4 (Rome: Istituto Giovanni XXIII nella Pontificia Università lateranense, 1964), 6; Wemple, *Women in Frankish Society*, 153, 176. Their *vita* also simply does not match the historical record of the early eighth century. Since little accurate information concerning these saints may have been available to the author, he could establish them as models for religious women by conforming the *vita* to late ninth-century expectations.

death never slowed them down. Both sisters continued to do good works, to instruct their sisters in Scripture, and to admonish them to follow their own example of behavior.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps less extraordinary women viewed encroaching death with more trepidation. The notices for the deaths of queens in annals, histories, and royal biographies are quite brief and provide few particulars. Thegan notes, for example, that Irmingard, the first wife of Louis the Pious, died of a fever.¹⁰¹ When Emma, wife of Louis the German, suffered a stroke in 874, the *Annals of Fulda* offered the rare detail that it left her unable to speak.¹⁰² That stroke might have contributed to her eventual death in 876.¹⁰³ She nevertheless reached a remarkable age for a Carolingian queen, most of whom died well before their husbands; she preceded Louis in death by only a few months.¹⁰⁴

The very paucity of detail in histories and annals suggests that narrative works such as hagiography and literary works such as poetry may reveal more vividly past views of female old age.¹⁰⁵ Certainly, none of my examples has yet had the same level of tension and drama as Ermold the Black's account of the death of Datus's mother, with which this essay began. Yet, the examples I have presented can aid in understanding why a Carolingian poem would include an episode in which a man chooses his horse over his mother's life. Since Datus was a grown man, his mother was probably past her childbearing years. Clerics in the Carolingian world believed a lay woman's principal role was motherhood, and Germanic law and Roman custom indicate that this belief had deep roots. By contemporary social standards, once a woman could no longer bear children, her family members might not have appreciated the other roles she could play into her old age. Indeed, those men who wrote the extant sources touching upon women almost certainly understood women in this way; nevertheless those same texts suggest that old women could remain important among the Carolingian elite. Though nothing in the poem indicates Datus's mother's precise status, a widow ideally was to enter the religious life. Perhaps, Ermold understood Datus's mother as a *deo sacrata*, though it is impossible to tell from the poem's text. If so, no

¹⁰⁰ *De sanctis virginibus Herlinde et Reinula*, Ch. 14, 389.

¹⁰¹ Thegan, *Gesta Hludowici imperatoris*. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum*, 64 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1995), Ch. 25, 167–278; here 214.

¹⁰² "Hemma quoque regina morbo paralisi correpta usum loquendi amisit." *Annales Fuldenses sive Annales Francorum Orientalis*, ed. G. H. Pertz and Friedrich Kurze. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum*, 7 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1891), 83.

¹⁰³ *Annales Fuldenses*, 85.

¹⁰⁴ Dutton, "Beyond the Topos of Senescence," 82.

¹⁰⁵ Literature may be a better source for views of old age throughout western history, see Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 34, 42. The majority of the essays in this volume reflect the rich information literature can provide about conceptions of old age and perceptions of the elderly.

wonder Datus feels such regret at her passing; he allowed a woman under religious vows to die when he had it in his power to prevent her death. Even if Ermold did not understand her to be a *deo sacrata*, he indicates that grown children still had reason to cherish their aged mothers, indeed that adults in their prime could see value in old women.

An old woman in Ermold's ninth-century world might preserve her family lands and memory, much as did the two Giselas, one the wife of Eberhard of Friuli and the other the patroness of the sainted Liutberga. Though the inability to bear children marked the passage into old age for Carolingian women, old women could nevertheless care for children much as Addula looked after Gregory or Gertrude after Eusebia, or teach the girls and younger women in their communities as Liutberga, Herlindis, and Renula did. They might also care for the sick alongside their younger counterparts. Queen mothers sometimes meddled in political affairs, and that possibility suggests that old women could sometimes still exert influence within their families.

Irrespective of the paucity of sources that mention old women, the ambiguity concerning a definition of female old age, and the idealized nature of the available information, it is possible to see that old women played important, though sometimes ambiguous, roles in Carolingian aristocratic society. In that regard, they are much like their male counterparts and the elderly throughout much of western history. The association of illness and age may have meant that others viewed the aged as burdens in need of care; mothers could meddle in the affairs of their grown children; and mothers might have claims over lands their children wished to control. In light of these possibilities, Datus's choice becomes comprehensible. His mother may have been a source of trouble for him; after all she ended up in Maures's hands, but his horror at his choice and the new life of spirituality and austerity he embraced after his mother's death demonstrate not merely love between mother and child but an appreciation for an aged parent. Despite the few and seemingly negative images of old women in Carolingian sources, those same texts reveal that old women could play vital roles in both family life and society in the Carolingian world.

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The Withdrawal of Aged Noblemen into Monastic Communities: Interpreting the Sources from Twelfth-Century Germany¹

One of the best-known examples of a German nobleman who laid down his arms and converted to the religious life during the Middle Ages was Count Gottfried of Cappenberg, who died as a Premonstratensian canon in January of the year 1127. Gottfried had first encountered the founder of the Premonstratensian order, Norbert of Xanten, six years earlier in Cologne, when the count was only twenty-three or twenty-four years of age. It was this experience that convinced the young Gottfried to act on his burgeoning desire to abandon the secular world. In subsequent years, he and his younger brother Otto converted their castle at Cappenberg into a house of canons, established two additional Premonstratensian houses, and donated all their lands to these new foundations. Shortly thereafter, Gottfried and Otto became canons at Cappenberg, and Gottfried's wife converted to the religious life at this time as well. Later sources written after Gottfried began to be revered as a local saint suggest that the count's conversion was motivated by his involvement in a particularly shocking incident. During a battle in February of 1121 Gottfried and his brother Otto purportedly started a fire that burned the cathedral in the town of Münster to the ground. This sin supposedly weighed heavily on the siblings in the following days and months and sparked their decision to seek atonement by becoming canons.²

¹ I would like to thank Lisa Wolverton, Rachel Fulton, and the participants at the Conference on *Old Age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* at the University of Arizona, the *Medieval Studies Workshop* at the University of Chicago, and the forty-fifth annual *Midwest Medieval History Conference* at the University of Evansville for commenting on earlier drafts of this article.

² Herbert Grundmann, "Gottfried von Cappenberg," *Westfälische Lebensbilder*. Vol. 8 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1959), 1–16 [reprinted in: *Ausgewählte Aufsätze*, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Schriften, 25.1 (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1976), 169–80]. See also Benjamin Arnold, *Power and Property in Medieval Germany: Economic and Social Change c. 900–1300* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 163; Regine Birkmeyer, *Ehretrennung und monastische Konversion im Hochmittelalter* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998), 178–83; Joachim Ehlers, "Adlige Stiftung und persönliche

The conversions of young noblemen like Gottfried to the religious life were remarkable acts of piety that frequently caught the attention of contemporaries, and such acts continue to attract the interest of modern historians as well.³ The story of Bernard of Clairvaux's successful efforts to convince many of his family members to abandon the secular world is perhaps the most famous example from Western Europe for the powerful pull that the spiritual life could exert on the nobility of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries.⁴ These dramatic conversions were, however, quite rare in this period. Inside the German empire, noblemen in their twenties and thirties did not typically cast aside their lands and lordships as willingly as Count Gottfried of Cappenberg. In the years when the chivalric ethos was beginning to influence German noble society, the knightly lifestyle was becoming more—not less—attractive to most young noblemen.⁵ As a result, youthful lords typically considered it to be a sufficient display of their piety to found and endow a religious community rather than to join one.⁶

Konversion: Zur Sozialgeschichte früher Prämonstratenserkonvente," *Geschichte und Verfassungsgefüge. Frankfurter Festgabe für Walter Schlesinger*, ed. Werner Gembruch, Peter Herde, et al. (Wiesbaden: Steiner Verlag, 1973), 32–55; and *Die Viten Gottfrieds von Cappenberg*, ed. Gerlinde and Ingrid Ehlers-Kisseler Niemeyer. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum*, 74 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 2005).

³ Birkmeyer, *Ehetrennung*; Herbert Grundmann, "Adelsbekehrungen im Hochmittelalter: Conversi und Nutriti im Kloster," *Adel und Kirche. Gerd Tellenbach zum 65. Geburtstag dargebracht von Freunden und Schülern*, ed. Josef Fleckenstein and Karl Schmid (Freiburg, Basel, et al.: Herder, 1968), 325–45 [reprinted in Grundmann, *Ausgewählte Aufsätze*, 125–49]; Bruno Lemesle, *La société aristocratique dans le Haut-Maine (XI^e–XII^e siècles)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1999), 85–94; Alexander Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 317–404; Ludwig Widmann, "Die Lebensbeschreibung des Grafen Ludwig von Arnstein," *Annalen des Vereins für Nassauische Alterthumskunde und Geschichtsforschung* 18 (1883–1884): 244–66; and Joachim Wollasch, "Parenté noble et monachisme réformateur: Observations sur les 'conversions' à la vie monastique aux XI^e et XII^e siècles," *Revue Historique* 264 (1980): 3–24.

⁴ Birkmeyer, *Ehetrennung*, 154–55, and Wollasch, "Parenté noble et monachisme réformateur," 21.

⁵ Joachim Bumke, *Courtly Culture: Literature and Society in the High Middle Ages*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (1986; Berkeley, Los Angeles, et al.: University of California Press, 1991).

⁶ Arnold, *Power and Property in Medieval Germany*, 150–64; Constance B. Bouchard, *Sword, Miter, and Cloister: Nobility and the Church in Burgundy, 980–1198* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987); Giles Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 209–56; David Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000–1300* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 311–15; John Howe, "The Nobility's Reform of the Medieval Church," *American Historical Review* 93.2 (1988): 317–39; Barbara H. Rosenwein, *To Be the Neighbor of Saint Peter: The Social Meaning of Cluny's Property, 909–1049* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989); Christine Sauer, *Fundatio und Memoria: Stifter und Klostergründer im Bild 1100 bis 1350* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993); Klaus Schreiner, "Mönchsein in der Adelsgesellschaft des hohen und späten Mittelalters: Klösterliche Gemeinschaftsbildung zwischen spiritueller Selbstbehauptung und sozialer Anpassung," *Historische Zeitschrift* 248 (1989): 557–620; Stephen D. White, *Custom, Kinship, and Gifts to Saints: The Laudatio Parentum in Western France, 1050–1150* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Thomas Hill, "Stiftermemoria und Gründungsgeschichte als Argument: zum historischen Selbstverständnis norddeutscher Klöster im

During the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, the majority of the withdrawals of German nobles into religious communities occurred later in the lives of these men, after their wives had died and after their heirs had reached adult age.⁷ Despite the fact that these late-in-life conversions were more common, scholars have had relatively little to say about them. The few historians who have discussed the issue have tended to describe these withdrawals in only broad terms. Simon Barton, in his study of the aristocracy of twelfth-century León and Castile, writes for example that some nobles, “perhaps induced by failing health or by a reluctance to continue enduring the rigours of life in the peripatetic court, may have sought the peace of the cloister in which to spend their declining years.”⁸ Constance Bouchard notes, “Old-age or even deathbed conversions were always common among the Burgundian nobility, since they wished to continue enjoying the secular life as long as they were healthy, even though they wanted to die in the sanctity of the cloister.”⁹ And Shulamith Shahar observes, “Old nobles who withdrew into monasteries . . . did not do so because of an official loss of status. They might have withdrawn because they felt weary and conscious that their standing was diminished, and perhaps from a desire to atone for their sins and to achieve that element of the chivalric ethos which they had failed to achieve during their careers as warriors, namely, living according to Christian moral precepts.”¹⁰

Each of these comments only begins to hint at the complex set of issues that historians must take into account when considering why an aging noble lord entered a monastic community. Within the German empire, lords who withdrew into monastic foundations late in their lives had their conversions shaped by an array of familial, political, medical, and religious factors. Determining which combination of these factors influenced the decision of a particular nobleman to withdraw from the secular world is complicated, however, by the nature of the

Hochmittelalter,” *Gemeinschaft und Geschichtsbilder im Hanseraum*, ed. Thomas Hill and Dietrich W. Poeck (Frankfurt a. M., Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 2000), 1–25; and Emilia Jamroziak, *Rievaulx Abbey and its Social Context, 1132–1300: Memory, Locality, and Networks* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 28–40.

⁷ I have consciously chosen to use the term *withdrawal* throughout this article to describe the entrances of noblemen into monastic communities later in their lives. I feel that this term is more neutral than *retirement*, which carries with it too many modern connotations that should not be projected backwards into the Middle Ages.

⁸ Simon Barton, *The Aristocracy in Twelfth-Century León and Castile* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 56.

⁹ Bouchard, *Sword, Miter, and Cloister*, 56.

¹⁰ Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: ‘Winter clothes us in shadow and pain’*, trans. Yael Lotan (1995; London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 121. Another generalization about the motives behind noble withdrawals can be found in Georges Minois, *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (1987; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 167.

extant sources. The most detailed accounts of the conversions of aging nobles were written by members of the religious communities into which these lords withdrew. These monastic authors tended, not surprisingly, to cast the late-in-life withdrawals of the converts who joined their communities in as pious a light as possible. Fortunately, by analyzing these accounts alongside evidence from other sources, it becomes possible to look beyond the biases of the monastic authors and to explore some of the choices that confronted lords as they grew old during the twelfth century. As I will argue here, noblemen who converted to the religious life late in their careers had to balance two potentially contradictory concerns as they weighed their decision to withdraw from the world: their responsibilities as leading members of noble society and their recognition of the inherent sinfulness of the lifestyle which lay at the heart of that society.¹¹

In the opening years of the thirteenth century, a canon from the religious house at Dießen in the duchy of Bavaria compiled a codex.¹² This canon, named Liutold, included in his book the Augustinian rule for canons, copies of tradition notices, and charters concerning his community's rights and property holdings, and various liturgical texts. Liutold also entered into his codex two necrologies, or calendars of the dead. These necrologies indicated which saints, past members of the religious house, and prominent patrons were to be prayed for on a particular day. Among the hundreds of entries contained in the necrologies is the one for a leading Bavarian nobleman, Count Berthold I of Andechs, who is listed under the twenty-seventh of June in the first of the two necrologies: "Berhtoldus comes, fundator huius loci, post conversus nostre congregationis frater obiit" ("Count Berthold, founder of this place, later a lay brother of our community, died").¹³

¹¹ There is no simple definition of old age, as Albrecht Classen reminds his readers in the introduction to this volume. As a result, it is impossible to provide a clear-cut and universally-applicable set of criteria for determining which high medieval German noblemen should be labeled *old* at the time of their withdrawals from secular life. Here, I will limit my discussion to those noble converts who are known to have enjoyed long careers—lasting three or four decades at the least—as laymen before they withdrew to their religious communities. The lords I will focus on here had outlived their first wives and had, at the time of their withdrawals, sons of adult age who were fully prepared to inherit their father's properties and rights. For a different perspective on the question of when to identify rulers as being old, see Paul Edward Dutton, "Beyond the Topos of Senescence: The Political Problems of Aged Carolingian Rulers," *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 75–94.

¹² Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 1018.

¹³ Michael Borgolte, "Stiftergedenken in Kloster Dießen. Ein Beitrag zur Kritik bayerischer Traditionsbücher," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 24 (1990): 235–89; here 273. Most adult noblemen who withdrew to religious communities became lay brothers (*conversi*) rather than monks or canons. For the purposes of this article the distinction is not an especially important one, since lay brothers were expected to abandon their secular lifestyles in much the same way as monks and canons. For more on lay brothers, see below.

Another Dießen canon, working perhaps a half-century after Liutold, added to the count of Andechs's entry the year of his death: 1151.¹⁴ Since Berthold had likely been born at some point during the 1080s, the necrological evidence suggests he was in his mid- to late sixties when he died.¹⁵ Beyond this educated guess about his age, however, nothing more can be said about the count during his final days and years. His last definitive appearance in sources from his own lifetime dates from 1143, leaving a span of eight years when nothing is known about his activities.¹⁶ Did he join the house of canons at Dießen as a lay brother soon after 1143, choosing to dedicate himself fully to the spiritual life as a second career? Did he remain active in the secular world until early 1151, becoming a lay brother only as he clung to life while on his deathbed? Or did his three adult sons force him to withdraw to Dießen at some point during the intervening years, seizing power from him at the first sign of weakness?

The frustratingly brief entry about Berthold in Liutold's codex offers no answers to these questions; the precise set of factors that led to the count of Andechs's late-in-life withdrawal from the secular world is impossible to determine. The equally brief necrological entries for many other twelfth-century lords create similar types of difficulties.¹⁷ Monastic chronicles are frequently just as problematic. A text from the monastery of Affligem in Brabant, for example, offers few specific details—beyond the standard topoi—about the conversion of Count Henry of Louvain, who had been appearing in sources for thirty years prior to his withdrawal in 1140: "Heinricus comes, filius ducis Godefridi superiore anno defuncti, militie cingulo deposito Affligemensis monachus factus, celestis militie signaculum accepit, et cito vocatus a Deo migravit" ("Count Henry, son of the duke Godfrey who had died the previous year, removed the belt of knighthood and was made a monk at Affligem. He accepted the mark of the heavenly knighthood, and having soon been called by God, he died [in 1141]").¹⁸ It is

¹⁴ Clm 1018, fol. 10r.

¹⁵ For the argument that Berthold was likely born in the 1080s, see Alois Schütz, "Die Grafen von Dießen und Andechs, Herzöge von Meranien," *Königliche Tochterstämme, Königswähler und Kurfürsten*, ed. Armin Wolf (Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 2002), 225–315; here 264.

¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Jonathan R. Lyon, "Cooperation, Compromise and Conflict Avoidance: Family Relationships in the House of Andechs, ca. 1100–1204," Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, IN, 2004, 186–94.

¹⁷ See, for example, *Necrologium Seonense*, ed. Sigismund Herzberg-Fränkell. Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Necrologia Germaniae, 2 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1904), 223: "Engilbertus ex duce monachus nostre congregationis predium dedit" (Duke Engelbert II of Carinthia, who died on 13 April 1141), and *Necrologium S. Lamberti*, ed. Herzberg-Fränkell. Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Necrologia Germaniae, 2, 321: "Diepoldus monachus et marchio" (Margrave Diepold II of Vohburg, who died on 8 April 1146).

¹⁸ *Sigeberti Gemblacensis Chronica. Auctarium Affligemense*, ed. D. L. C. Bethmann. Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores, 6 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1844), 400. See also Carl

perhaps because of this relative paucity of detailed sources that the few modern historians who have commented on the withdrawals of aging medieval noblemen into monastic communities have tended to discuss the issue only in general terms. I will concentrate in this article on two of the most extensive accounts that survive from the twelfth-century German empire for the late-in-life conversions of aging nobles. They both concern prominent aristocrats from the duchy of Saxony who withdrew into their own monastic foundations: Wiprecht of Groitzsch († 1124) and Conrad of Wettin († 1157). These noblemen crossed paths briefly during the early 1120s, as Wiprecht was ending his career and Conrad was beginning his. In 1123, Emperor Henry V enfeoffed Wiprecht with the marches of Meissen and Lausitz, thus giving Wiprecht control over important regions of eastern Saxony. However, Duke Lothar of Saxony, who was engaged in a military conflict with the emperor at this time, countered Henry V by choosing his own allies to govern these marches and named Conrad of Wettin as margrave of Meissen. The clash between the emperor's and the duke's rival claimants was brief. Wiprecht of Groitzsch died on 22 May 1124, and Henry V a year later on 23 May 1125. Conrad of Wettin then gradually secured his and his lineage's control over Meissen—and later Lausitz as well—during the subsequent years.¹⁹

Wiprecht of Groitzsch, though he was a pivotal figure in the conflict over the Saxon march of Meissen in the years 1123–1124, did not die defending his rights as margrave; he spent his final days as a monk in the religious community of Pegau. During the 1090s, Wiprecht was the driving force behind the foundation of this monastery, which lay only a short distance west of his castle at Groitzsch. It was Wiprecht, moreover, who played a central role in bringing monks from the nearby monastery at Corvey to Pegau to introduce the neo-Cluniac Hirsau reforms. The second abbot of Pegau, Windolf (1100–1150)—who had previously been a monk at Corvey—proved to be a close ally of Wiprecht, and the pair worked together in the opening two decades of the twelfth century to promote forest clearance and settlement in the region around Groitzsch and Pegau. The monastery of Pegau was thus the quintessential noble house-monastery (*Hauskloster*); it was a religious community that was bound to its founder Wiprecht not only spiritually but also economically and politically.²⁰

The most detailed source that survives for the career of Wiprecht of Groitzsch

Knetsch, *Das Haus Brabant*, 1 (Darmstadt: Selbstverlag des historischen Vereins für das Grossherzogtum Hessen, 1917), 20.

¹⁹ For more detailed accounts of the events of 1123–1124 in Saxony, see Lutz Partenheimer, *Albrecht der Bär: Gründer der Mark Brandenburg und des Fürstentums Anhalt* (Cologne, Weimar, et al.: Böhlau Verlag, 2001), 33–34, and Stefan Pätzold, *Die frühen Wettiner: Adelsfamilie und Hausüberlieferung bis 1221* (Cologne, Weimar, et al.: Böhlau Verlag, 1997), 31–33.

²⁰ Hans Patze, "Die Pegauer Annalen, die Königserhebung Wratislaws von Böhmen und die Anfänge der Stadt Pegau," *Jahrbuch für die Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutschlands* 12 (1963): 1–62; here 28–40.

was written inside this monastery at Pegau. At some point during the mid-twelfth century, a monk began to write a text which is known today as the *Annales Pegavienses* and which focuses almost exclusively on Wiprecht until this lord's death in 1124.²¹ Indeed, the initial author of the annals appears to have lost interest in his work after he finished his account of Wiprecht's life, for the entries for the years from 1125 until 1137 were all copied from other sources, whereas the material concerning earlier years is all unique to the Pegau annals. The clear emphasis on Wiprecht's career in the opening part of the annals has not gone unnoticed by modern historians. Hans Patze describes Wiprecht as the hero (*Held*) of the annals' first author, and Thomas Vogtherr refers to the initial section of the *Annales Pegavienses* as a *vita* of Wiprecht because it provides a detailed narrative of Wiprecht's life from his (supposedly) sinful early years to his (supposedly) pious and humble death.²² Regardless of how one chooses to label the depiction of Wiprecht in the annals, there is no question that the principal aim of the monk who wrote the early sections of the work was to memorialize the founder of his monastery.²³

The lengthy entry in the annals for the year 1124 provides the only detailed account of the final days of Wiprecht's life. Though the passage gives no indication of Wiprecht's age at the time of his death, he was likely in his sixties or possibly even his seventies. He had been involved in imperial politics since the early 1080s, and his two sons had already begun to play an active role at his side prior to 1110.²⁴ But as the *Annales Pegavienses* reveal, despite his advanced age, he continued to exercise his lordship into the opening months of 1124:

Anno 1124. Quoniam in praecedentibus pro posse et nosse retulimus domni Wiperti marchionis, Bigaugiensis coenobii fundatoris, nobilissimam genealogiam, tum etiam a puero in virtute animi et corporis industriam, et qualiter in hac provincia, quae Suurbia dicitur, in praediis et beneficiis tam in pace quam in bello acquisitis tandem prae caeteris ditatus invaluerit, principatum quoque ac monarchiam in Lusiz, sed et praefecturam in Magdeburch principalem optinuerit; et inter haec omnia quam ferventer in Bigaugis et aliorum coenobiorum tum fundacione tum cooperatione pro suorum enormitate delictorum Deo et sanctis satisfacere studuerit, cunctisque terrenis opibus divinum cultum praetulerit: modo dicendum restat, multis tamen brevitatis causa omissis, quam beato fine decesserit. In villa Halle, ubi advocatae causas

²¹ *Annales Pegavienses et Bosovienses*, ed. Georg Heinrich Pertz, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores, 16 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1859), 232–70.

²² Patze, "Die Pegauer Annalen," 5, and Thomas Vogtherr, "Wiprecht von Groitzsch und das Jakobspatroszinium des Klosters Pegau: Ein Beitrag zur Kritik der Pegauer Annalen," *Neues Archiv für sächsische Geschichte* 72 (2001): 35–53; here 39.

²³ For more on the annalist's motives for writing, see *Annales Pegavienses*, 234.

²⁴ The basic details of Wiprecht's life and career can be found in Gustav Blumschein, "Wiprecht von Groitzsch," Ph.D. Diss., University of Jena, 1881.

amministrabat, dum hiemali tempore pernoctaret, in ipsius conticinio noctis omnibus ex securitate peractique diei laetitia gravi somno detentis, paleam ad militum lectisternia huc et illuc negligenter sero disiectam focus ex vicino lare corripuit, et cum aliquamdiu ignis invaluisse, solus princeps expergefactus somno excutitur; impaciensque morae silenter tamen, ut erat seminudus, surgens, nudis plantis conculcando paleas extinguere aggressus est. Quod et omnibus insciis perfecit, ac semiustus stratum revisit. Ex hac exustione paulatim in tantam imbecillitatem devenit, ut ex eo numquam convalesceret. Mane facto manifestis indiciis res innotuit, quae tam compassione quam ammiratione cunctos affecit. Exin ad suam Groischa se iubens reduci, prius ad suum asilum, ut ante semper consueverat, Bigaugiam divertit. Ubi inter manus suis eum deducuntibus, tandem ex intimo cordis oratione fusa, ne fratres suae imbecillitatis praesentia nimium sollicitaret, ad urbem statim excessit. Ubi tota hieme ingravescente morbo, tandem exterioris hominis pertaesus importunitatem, totum se convertit ad Deum, qui solus interioris hominis sanat infirmitatem, ut eius ab interitu perpetuo vitam redimeret. Misso igitur ad filium sororis suae, Ruokerum Magdaburgensem archiepiscopum aliosque vicinos episcopos, Arnoldum Merseburgensem, Richwinum Zicensem, Gotheboldum Misnensem ac venerabilem Windolfum abbatem suum, quaesivit ab eis auxilium et consilium ad animae suae remedium. Qui considerantes eum in desperatis rebus agere, post multa compassionis et consolationis alloquia, habitum monasticae religionis eum assumere consultum inierunt. Qui quam libenter ac devote huiusmodi consilium animadverterit, ex sequentibus conici melius poterit. Statim in praesentia eorundem episcoporum cum deditione gladii tam militaria quam omnia secularia perosus abdicavit. Sequenti die Bigaugiam allatus, cum luctu maximo fratrum est susceptus, habituque suscepto, cum magna spiritus contricione regularis propositi votum coram altari principali praesentibus fratribus fecit, moxque inter multorum manus deductus est. Deinceps, ut dicitur, tanta observantia obedientiam exequi studuit, ut nec cibi nec potus quicquam sumere, nullique suorum sed nec filio se videri vel visitari, nisi permissione data, consentiret, obedientiae silentioque summopere vacans. Ita post aliquot dies Deo vocante solutus, cum magna frequentia episcopis et laicis exequias peragentibus, ut singuli episcopi singulis diebus pro eo missas facerent, honorifice terrae commendatur, et in medio sui monasterii inter uxorem ac filium sepelitur. Eadem die praedium quod dicitur Karlestorph pro eius anima traditum constat. Transiit autem 11. Kal. Iunii. Cui succedente filio Heinricho, duo comites Adelbertus et Cuonradus marcham eius invadunt, quam etiam aliquamdiu idem Adelbertus optinuit. Sed Lothario regnante, Heinrichus in eius gratiam rediens, eam recepit."

[In the preceding passages, we recounted to the best of our ability and knowledge the most noble lineage of the lord margrave Wiprecht, founder of the monastery of Pegau, as well as the diligence he devoted to the virtues of soul and body from boyhood. He, enriched above others with allods and benefices he had acquired both in peace and war, at length grew powerful in this province, which is called Sorbia. He obtained lordship and rule in Lusatia as well as the office of burgrave in Magdeburg. Throughout all of this he fervently endeavored — through the foundation of Pegau and of other monasteries as well as through his cooperation [with these foundations] — to render satisfaction to God and the saints for the enormity of his transgressions. He also

placed divine worship before all earthly riches. Since we have already recounted all of this, though for the sake of brevity we have omitted many things, it now remains to be said how he died a blessed death.

One night during the winter, Wiprecht was staying in the village of Halle, where he was administering advocatial justice. In the first part of the evening, when everyone was lost in a deep sleep, in safety and happiness after the day's accomplishments, the fire from the nearby hearth set alight the straw which was used for the beds of the knights—and which was scattered about negligently here and there during the evening. After the fire had grown stronger for awhile, only the lord was aroused from his sleep. Not enduring any delay—yet silently, as he was semi-nude—he got up and attempted to extinguish the straw by stomping on it with the bare soles of his feet. He accomplished this with everyone else unaware, and half-burned he returned to his piece of bedding. On account of this fire, he little by little arrived at a state of such great weakness that he never recovered from it.

When morning came, the situation was understood from the obvious signs and moved everyone to compassion and wonder. Ordering that he be returned from there to his castle at Groitzsch, he first turned aside toward his refuge at Pegau, as had always been his custom before. There, to his own men who were carrying him in their arms, he poured out at length a prayer from the depths of his heart that, lest the presence of his feebleness disturb the brothers much, he be brought immediately to the town. There, with his sickness getting worse the entire winter, disgusted by the unfitness of the exterior man, he converted himself completely to God, who alone cures the sickness of the interior man, so that he might buy his life back from eternal ruin.

He therefore sent for his nephew, for Archbishop Ruoker of Magdeburg, for other neighboring bishops (Arnold of Merseburg, Richwin of Zeitz, Gotbold of Meissen), and for his venerable abbot Windolf [of Pegau]. He sought from them help and counsel for the remedy of his soul. Seeing him to be in desperate circumstances, they undertook to advise him, after many words of compassion and consolation, to put on the habit of monastic life. How willingly and devotedly Wiprecht paid attention to such counsel can be concluded better from the following: in the presence of these very bishops, with the surrender of his sword, he immediately renounced military and indeed all secular affairs, hating them. On the following day, having been carried to Pegau, he was received with the greatest sorrow of the brothers, and having received the habit, with great contrition of spirit he made the vow of the regular monastic community before the main altar with the brothers present. Soon he was led away in the arms of the many.

Thereafter, so it is said, he strove to practice obedience with such great observance that he would not consent to consume any food or drink, nor would he be seen or visited by any of his men, not even his son, unless permission had been given, devoting himself above all to silence and obedience. And so after not many days, with God calling, he was freed. With bishops and laymen performing funerals with great frequency—as individual bishops on individual days said mass for him—he was honorably commended to the earth and was buried in the middle of his monastery between his wife and son. It is said that on the same day he handed over for his soul

the property that is called Karlsdorf. He passed away on the twenty-second of May. With his son Henry succeeding him, the two counts Albrecht and Conrad invaded his march, which the same Albrecht obtained for some time. But with Lothar ruling, Henry returned into his grace and received it.^{25]}

This rather graphic account of Wiprecht's final days must first be considered from the perspective of its author. The anonymous monk from Pegau, as he put ink to parchment in the late 1140s or early 1150s, knew with the advantage of hindsight that the noble house of Groitzsch would last fewer than twenty years after Wiprecht's death. The margrave's only surviving son Henry — whose death in 1135 is reported in only a single sentence by the annalist — was the last male member of the lineage. Bertha, Wiprecht's only daughter, died a few years later in 1143. It is noteworthy that the Pegau annals include no entries for the years 1144 to 1146, an indication perhaps that Bertha's death represented a significant caesura in the monastery's history.²⁶ Regardless, the end of the house of Groitzsch meant the end of a stable and prosperous phase for the religious community. The advocacy over Pegau passed into royal control in 1135 and remained there for the remainder of the twelfth century. Wiprecht's properties and rights fell to the noble house of Wettin, which had its own monastic foundations to endow and patronize.²⁷ Thus, during the period when the *Annales Pegavienses* were compiled, Pegau was without a prominent local noble protector and supporter. Wiprecht's career had been the high point of the monastery's brief history, and it is for this reason that the annalist focused almost exclusively on the margrave's glorious deeds.

Unfortunately, no other extant source discusses the circumstances surrounding Wiprecht's entrance into Pegau in any great detail.²⁸ There are, however, texts that make it possible to understand better events in the months leading up to his conversion, and these sources offer a very different perspective on Wiprecht's final days. On 11 February 1124, Wiprecht and his ally Abbot Windolf of Pegau witnessed a charter of the archbishop of Mainz for the monastery of Oldisleben.²⁹ Since the *Annales Pegavienses* report that the accident that eventually led to Wiprecht's death occurred in the winter, he must have been injured soon after this February charter, presumably in late February or early March. He did not die until 22 May, however, meaning he lived for approximately two to three months after

²⁵ *Annales Pegavienses*, 254–55.

²⁶ *Annales Pegavienses*, 258.

²⁷ Pätzold, *Die frühen Wettiner*, 234. Conrad of Wettin's son Dedo was count of Groitzsch in the later twelfth century.

²⁸ The *Annales Palidenses*, for example, simply indicate that he died after becoming a monk: *Annales Palidenses Auctore Theodore Monacho*, ed. Georg Heinrich Pertz, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores*, 16 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1859), 77. For more on this source, see below.

²⁹ *Mainzer Urkundenbuch*, 1, ed. Manfred Stimming (Darmstadt: Verlag des historischen Vereins für Hessen, 1932), 421–22, no. 516.

suffering his injuries. Moreover, though the author of the *Annales* does not explicitly state on what day Wiprecht took his monastic vow, the chronicler does indicate he died not long afterwards. All of this suggests that the elderly Wiprecht, who was clearly still an active figure in the days and weeks leading up to his injuries, did not make the decision to become a monk until it was obvious he would not recover from his wounds. Is there any reason to believe he might have been reluctant to commit himself to the spiritual life prior to this late date?

As previously mentioned, Wiprecht became embroiled in a conflict over the marches of Meissen and Lausitz during 1123. This dispute, which was only one element of a much broader conflict along the frontiers of Saxony, grew to involve many of the leading figures of the region. The author of the *Annales Pegavienses*, in his entry for the year 1123, is virtually silent about Wiprecht's participation in this conflict, discussing it in only a sentence before going on to describe an incident concerning the archbishop of Mainz.³⁰ But the chronicler Cosmas of Prague († 1125) provides a much more detailed account of the dispute over the marches, likely because Duke Vladislav I of Bohemia († 1125), who was an important ally of Wiprecht, became embroiled in the conflict.³¹ Vladislav and an army of Bohemians marched into Saxony in 1123 to support Wiprecht and the imperial side. According to Cosmas, Duke Lothar of Saxony's forces prevented Duke Vladislav's army from uniting with Wiprecht's forces. Lothar then deceived Vladislav into thinking that Wiprecht and the emperor had not sent an army at all. As a result of this deception, the Bohemians returned home.³² Another chronicle, the *Annalista Saxo*, further reports that Duke Lothar was then able to turn his attention to Wiprecht, who was forced to flee from the battlefield.³³

According to Cosmas, Duke Vladislav's forces left Saxony in late November of 1123—approximately six months prior to Wiprecht's death.³⁴ At the time of the fire in late February or early March, therefore, Wiprecht was struggling to maintain his position as margrave. The gravity of the situation is suggested by the *Annales Pegavienses*, which report that after Wiprecht's death, Wiprecht's only surviving son and heir Henry was immediately attacked by Conrad of Wettin and other

³⁰ *Annales Pegavienses*, 254.

³¹ Cosmas of Prague, *Cosmae Pragensis Chronica Boemorum*, ed. Bertold Bretholz, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores rerum Germanicarum, Nova series*, 2 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1923). I would like to thank Lisa Wolverton for providing me with an early version of her translation of Cosmas's chronicle and for offering me her insight into Cosmas's work. For more on Cosmas and Vladislav I, see Lisa Wolverton, *Hastening Toward Prague: Power and Society in the Medieval Czech Lands*. Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

³² Cosmas, 225–27.

³³ *Annalista Saxo*, ed. Georg Waitz, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores*, 6 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1844), 760.

³⁴ Cosmas of Prague, 227.

enemies.³⁵ Wiprecht's injuries must therefore have occurred at the worst possible moment for him politically and militarily. The margrave was stricken in the middle of a war he was on the verge of losing, and despite his advanced age, he was likely reluctant to abandon the secular world and put his heir in an even more tenuous position. This context suggests that—despite the efforts of the Pegau annalist to cast Wiprecht's withdrawal in a pious light—Wiprecht's entry into Pegau was essentially a deathbed act performed by an elderly, badly ailing man who had recently suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of his enemies. The author of the *Annales* almost certainly knew this. Indeed, he seems to hint at the real situation when he remarks that Wiprecht chose, after suffering his injuries, to spend the winter in the nearby town rather than the monastery of Pegau; though the annalist claims Wiprecht made this decision because he did not want to disturb the monks, the margrave may also have been trying to maintain his secular authority for as long as possible by remaining distant from the religious community. Of course, it was not in the best interest of a monk at Pegau to describe the final days of his monastery's founder and greatest patron in such worldly terms. By casting Wiprecht's withdrawal in a more pious light, the annalist preserved the memory of him as the ideal noble lord whose decades-long support for the monastery had become especially significant in the wake of his lineage's extinction.

The career of Margrave Conrad of Wettin, who withdrew to his monastic foundation a little more than three decades after Wiprecht's death, provides additional evidence for the complex set of factors that could lay behind the conversion of an aging lord. Conrad was most likely born in or around the year 1098, since the best source for his withdrawal indicates he was fifty-nine years of age when he died in 1157.³⁶ By the year 1119, he was married, and he and his wife Liutgard († 1146) are known to have had at least twelve children, five of them boys who survived to inherit their father's rights and properties. As mentioned above, in 1123 Conrad received the title of margrave of Meissen from Duke Lothar of Saxony, making him a key figure in the east of the duchy and one of Wiprecht of Groitzsch's chief rivals. When his brother Dedo died the following year, he became sole heir to his lineage's rights and properties, further enhancing his prestige and influence. For the next three decades, Margrave Conrad was a leading noble within the duchy of Saxony and indeed within the entire German empire. Finally, in November of 1156, he laid down his sword in his castle at Meissen, divided his lordships among his five sons, and entered a house of Augustinian canons, St. Peter's on the Lauterberg, where he died early the following year.³⁷

³⁵ *Annales Pegavienses*, 255.

³⁶ See below.

³⁷ For a brief summary of his life and career, see Pätzold, *Die frühen Wettiner*, 31–40.

Conrad's older brother Dedo had been the original founder of St. Peter's, establishing the community only a short distance from his castle of Wettin in 1124. However, because Dedo had died that same year, he had only begun the process of endowing the house of canons. It therefore fell to Conrad to ensure the survival of the religious community, and in 1125 Conrad granted a series of properties and rights to St. Peter's that provided the Augustinian canons with a strong economic base.³⁸ The *Chronicon Montis Sereni*, which was written by one of the canons of St. Peter's in the mid-1220s and which includes a detailed history of the religious community and the noble house of Wettin from 1124 until 1225, states after its description of Conrad's donations in 1125 that "unde eciam non inmerito fundatoris nomen hereditavit" ("whence, not undeservedly, he also inherited the name of founder.")³⁹ Conrad and his wife Liutgard remained important patrons of St. Peter's on the Lauterberg throughout their lives, and it is therefore not surprising that Conrad chose the house of canons when he withdrew from the secular world.

The *Chronicon Montis Sereni* includes under the year 1156 the most detailed extant description of the events surrounding Conrad's entrance into St. Peter's:

Anno 1156. Conradus Misnensis et Orientalis marchio, gracia divina se preveniente, incertitudinem vite sue considerans timensque ne, si labenti mundo diu inherere voluisset, ipse quoque simul ad lapsum traheretur, ipsum relinquere et monasterium petere stabili secum proposito diffinivit. Volens autem ecclesie ad quam anhelebat, scilicet Sereni Montis, quam iam sufficienter, prout oportunitas ei fuit, locupletaverat, eciam in futurum prospicere, Wichmanno archiepiscopo et Alberto marchione de Brandenburc, filiis eciam suis omnibus, multisque aliis ecclesiasticis et secularibus viris nobilibus et ministerialibus accersitis, ad locum venit, ut in eorum presencia, quod intenderet, consummaret. Primo itaque possessiones, quasunque vel ipse vel uxor eius loco contulerant, per manus filiorum suorum, Othonis videlicet Misnensis marchionis, Tiderici Orientalis marchionis, Heinrici comitis de Witin, Dedonis comitis de Rochelez et Friderici comitis de Brene, offerri fecit, ne aliqua de his post mortem eius questio nasceretur. Est autem quantitas harum possessionum 183 mansi et dimidius, exceptis his qui ad Numicensem pertinent ecclesiam, quorum numerus est 70 et dimidius, et excepta silva quam in diversis locis noscitur contulisse. Deinde filiorum vel heredum quemlibet suorum seniores post se advocatum loci ordinans, hoc statuit, ne advocacia ipsa ulli umquam iure feudi concedatur et ne advocatus aliquid servicii secularis extra placitum fratrum in rebus ecclesie quasi ex iure sibi audeat usurpare, et ut filii eius, quod eciam ipsi promiserunt, et ministeriales ipsorum in hoc loco sepulturam haberent, nimirum certus, ecclesiam ex hac causa in temporalibus maxime promovendam. His ita dispositis, coram altari beati Petri veteris

³⁸ Ibid., 191–93.

³⁹ *Chronicon Montis Sereni*, ed. Ernst Ehrenfeuchter, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores, 23 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1874), 139.

hominis vestibus exutus et regularis vite habitu per manus archiepiscopi Wichmanni vestitus, voluntariam paupertatem pro amore Christi amplexus est cum magno favore presencium, quibus eciam nberrimas devocio lacrimas extorquebat, quod tantam in viro tali mutacionem videbant, in quo videlicet divina gracia et misericordia sensum omnem supergrediens luce clarius apparebat. Tunc deinde iam tiro Christi filios advocat ecclesiamque suam, cuius scilicet iam membrum effectus fuerat, gracie ipsorum commendat, ut ei, tamquam in qua patrem suum sive viventem sive mortuum haberi scirent et matrem et in qua cum ipsis requieturi essent, opem suam ubique pretendere non dissimularent. Hec acta sunt die beati Andree apostoli, quo die nemus in orientali parte monti adiacens extremam oblacionem suam beato Petri obtulit. Vixit autem post conversionem mensibus duobus et diebus quinque. Nec hoc semper sine speciali quadam providencia Dei actum fuisse credendum est, quod eum in inicio conversionis sue adhuc in fervore spiritus existentem de temptacionibus huius seculi Dominus liberare dignatus est. Timeri enim poterat secundum humanam fragilitatem ne, cum vidisset filios suos coram se principali gracia pollentes et ministeriales suos diviciis seculi et mundiali pompa fulgentes, si non actum, tamen animum a quiete monasterii, quam elegerat, vel leviter revocasset. Unde convenienter de illo dici poterat, quod in libro sapientie de talibus scriptum est: *Consummatus in brevi explevit tempora multa. Raptus est, ne malicia mutaret intellectum eius. Placita erat Deo anima eius, propter hoc properavit educere illum de medio iniquitatum.* Mortuusque est Non. Febr. anno vite sue 59. sepultusque est a Wichmanno archiepiscopo in medio ecclesie, ubi in dextera ipsius uxor eius et post eam in eodem latere soror eius Machtildis, mater archiepiscopi, cuius anniversarius est 12. Kal. Februarii, consepulte sunt. Exequiis eciam eius interfuit Walo Havelbergensis episcopus et Albertus marchio et Herimannus filius eius omnesque filii ipsius preter Othonem marchionem et alii multi. Qui quoniam tulerat crucem suam et Christum secutus fuerat, discipulum Domini fuisse nulli dubium est. Unde merito animam eius in eterna requie collocare dignabitur, sicut ipse talibus promisit dicens: *Amen dico vobis, quod vos, qui reliquistis omnia et secuti estis me, centuplum accipietis et vitam eternam possidebitis.*

[Margrave Conrad of Meissen and Lausitz, with divine grace intervening on his behalf, considered the uncertainty of his life. He feared that, if he should want to cling to the transient world for too long a while, he might be dragged along at the same time toward sin. He [therefore] resolved to leave the world behind and to seek for himself a monastery with a stable way of life. He wanted, moreover, to provide into the future for the church toward which he was striving, namely the Lauterberg, which he had already enriched sufficiently in proportion to what was suitable for him. He (therefore) summoned Archbishop Wichmann [of Magdeburg] and Margrave Albrecht of Brandenburg, as well as all his sons, many other secular and ecclesiastical men, and his ministerials, and he came to that place [the Lauterberg] in order that in their presence he might bring about what he intended. And so firstly, he made to be offered through the hands of his sons—namely Margrave Otto of Meissen, Margrave Dietrich of Lausitz, Count Henry of Wettin, Count Dedo of Rochlitz, and Count Frederick of Brehna—whatever possessions either he or his wife had conferred on that place so that no question concerning these possessions might arise after his death. The quantity of these possessions is 183 and one-half *mansi*, excepting those that pertain to the church

at Niemeck, the number of which is 70 and one-half *mansi*, and excepting the forest that he is known to have conferred in various places. Decreeing that whosoever was the eldest among his sons and heirs should be the monastery's advocate after him, he established that the advocacy should not be granted to anyone by feudal law at any time and that the advocate should not dare to usurp for himself, as if by right, any of the secular revenue from the church's possessions beyond the approval of his brothers. He also established that his sons, who indeed so promised, and their ministerials would have the right to be buried there. He made very certain that the church would be greatly enriched in temporalities for this reason.

After these matters had thus been arranged, Conrad stripped off the clothes of the old man in front of the altar of the blessed Peter and was clothed by the hand of Archbishop Wichmann in the habit of the regular life. He embraced voluntary poverty for the love of Christ with the great favor of those present, from whom his devotion was wrenching out abundant tears because they were seeing so great a transformation in such a man, in whom plainly divine grace and mercy were appearing with a brighter light, surpassing all the senses. Then the recruit of Christ called together his sons, and he committed his church, namely the one of which he had just become a member, to their protection. He did this so that they might not find an excuse to extend their support somewhere else, other than to that church in which they knew that their father—whether living or dead—would be enclosed (and their mother too), and in which they would be laid to rest with their parents. These things were done on the day of the blessed apostle Andrew, on which day he offered to blessed Peter as his final oblation a wood adjoining the eastern part of the mountain (the Lautenberg).

He lived, however, two months and fifteen days after his conversion. And without a certain special providence, this would not be believed: that the Lord saw fit to free him from the temptations of this world in the beginning of his conversion, while he was living in a spirit of fervor, was an act of God. Given human frailty, it is possible to fear that, when Conrad saw before him his sons strong with princely grace and his ministerials glittering with the riches of the world and worldly pomp, if not for an act of God, he might have happily recalled his spirit from the quiet of the monastery that he had chosen. Whence what was written about such men in the Book of Wisdom can also conveniently be said about him: 'Having become perfect in a short while, he reached the fullness of a long career. Snatched away, lest wickedness pervert his mind or deceit beguile his soul. For his soul was pleasing to the Lord, therefore he sped him out of the midst of wickedness.'⁴⁰ And he died on 5 February in the fifty-ninth year of his life, and he was buried by Archbishop Wichmann in the middle of the church, where on his right was buried his wife and after her on the same side was buried his sister Matilda, the mother of the archbishop, whose anniversary is the twenty-first of January. At his funeral were present Bishop Walo of Havelberg, Margrave Albrecht [of Brandenburg] and Albrecht's son Herman, all of his own sons except Otto, and many others. And since Conrad had taken His cross and had followed Christ, there is no

⁴⁰ The author of the *Chronicon* has here altered the order of three verses from the Book of Wisdom: 4:13, 4:11 and 4:14. I have based this translation on the on-line New American Bible at <http://www.vatican.va/archive/bible/> (last accessed on Nov. 1, 2006).

doubt he was a disciple of the Lord. Whence with merit it will be regarded as fitting that his soul is put to bed in eternal rest, just as Jesus promised to such men, saying, 'Amen, I say to you, that you who leave behind everything and follow me shall receive a hundredfold and shall possess eternal life' (paraphrasing Matthew 19:28–29).⁴¹

The author of the *Chronicon*, whose aim was first and foremost to write a history of the Lauterberg religious community rather than a history of the noble house of Wettin, betrays many of his own biases in this passage. As he compiled his work in the opening decades of the thirteenth century, he knew that his house of canons was no longer the only great Wettin religious foundation. Conrad's sons did not all make the Lauterberg canons the focus of their patronage strategies. Moreover, despite the promises that the *Chronicon* insists they made, Conrad's sons did not all choose to be buried at St. Peter's. Otto, the eldest son, founded a Cistercian community at Altzelle and selected this house as his final resting place. Another son, Dedo, chose to be interred in the house of Augustinian canons he had established at Zschillen. And a third son, Dietrich, though he was buried on the Lauterberg, directed much of his patronage toward his own Cistercian foundation of Dobrilugk.⁴² For the author of the *Chronicon*, therefore, the generation of Conrad's sons had failed to live up to their father's expectations.⁴³ Conrad thus appears in the *Chronicon* as the ideal patron, whose extraordinary devotion to St. Peter's ended with the ultimate act of piety, namely his own entrance into the community.

Though the most detailed, the *Chronicon* is not the earliest surviving piece of evidence for Conrad's conversion. Indeed, the sources for Conrad's final days are fortunately much richer than the sources for Wiprecht's. One of the best extant texts relating to his withdrawal is a charter for the Lauterberg house of canons drawn up in Conrad's name and dated 30 November 1156, the day that the margrave of Meissen left the secular world behind for the religious life.⁴⁴ The charter, which was written by a canon at St. Peter's, indicates that the first step in Conrad's conversion process had occurred a few days earlier at the castle of Meissen, where Conrad had formally laid down his arms.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, the text provides no explanation for *why* Conrad was setting aside the accoutrements of the

⁴¹ *Chronicon*, 150–51.

⁴² Pätzold, *Die frühen Wettiner*, 198–211.

⁴³ Conrad's sons also ceased to perform their duties as advocates, naming judges to act in their stead: Stefan Pätzold, "Das Lauterberger Erbe: Zu den mittelalterlichen Ursachen des neuzeitlichen Interesses an dem Augustinerchorherrenstift St. Peter bei Halle an der Saale," *Jahrbuch für die Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutschlands* 48 (2002): 1–28; here 13.

⁴⁴ *Urkunden der Markgrafen von Meissen und Landgrafen von Thüringen 1100–1195*, ed. Otto Posse. Codex Diplomaticus Saxoniae Regiae, part I, 2 (Leipzig: Giesecke & Devrient, 1889), 176–79, no. 262.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 178: "...eo die, quando in Misne arma deposui."

noble life and joining a religious community; instead it describes in great detail the margrave's motivations for founding the house of canons three decades earlier:

Apud universos Christi fideles notum esse volo et perpetue memorie commendari desidero, qualiter ego ad placandam iram superni iudicis, quam innumerabilem enormitate flagiciorum a diebus iuventutis mee heu me irritasse me verebar. Consultis quam pluribus religiosis et sapientibus viris in remissione peccatorum meorum et dilecte coniugis mee Luichardis et ceterorum carorum meorum aecclesiam deo et sancto Petro in Monte Sereno a primis fundamentis devote inchoavi.

[I want it to be known and I desire it to be committed to perpetual memory by all the faithful of Christ how I—in order to placate the anger of the judge on high, whom alas I was afraid I had irritated with the enormity of the countless disgraceful acts from the days of my youth—consulted with very many pious and wise men. [Thereafter], for the forgiveness of my sins and the sins of my dear wife Liutgard and the sins of my other loved ones, I faithfully laid the foundations of a church on the Lauterberg for God and Saint Peter.”]⁴⁶

This passage is followed by a lengthy list of properties which Conrad and his wife had previously donated to the community and which his five sons now promised to protect and defend. The author of the *Chronicon* almost certainly had access to this charter when writing his account of Conrad's withdrawal, for the language of the chronicle mirrors that of the charter in several places.

A second source that sheds light on Conrad's final days is the anonymous *Genealogia Wettinensis*, the Wettin Genealogy, which was produced during the second decade of the thirteenth century, only a few years before the *Chronicon*.⁴⁷ This text was composed by someone with close ties to the house of Wettin, quite possibly a canon of St. Peter's.⁴⁸ The *Genealogia*, like the 1156 charter, begins by discussing Conrad's foundation of the house of canons in the 1120s but then describes his becoming a lay brother:

Conradus igitur marchio ecclesiam a fratre suo inchoatam in honore beati Petri in Sereno Monte a fundamentis erexit largisque sue proprietatis prediis ditatam in ius et proprietatem Romane ecclesie tradidit et clerum canonicorum regularium ibi Deo famulaturum instituit. Quibus et ipse omnibus mundi pompis ex integro renunciatis, pauper pauperibus pro veris divitiis associatur 2. Kal. Decembris conversus et in ipso anno Non. Februarii defunctus. Moritur autem anno 1156, a Wichmanno Magdeburgense archiepiscopo et Walone Havelbergense episcopo, presentibus filiis

⁴⁶ Ibid., 176–77.

⁴⁷ *Genealogia Wettinensis*, ed. Ernst Ehrenfeuchter, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores*, 23 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1874), 226–30.

⁴⁸ Pätzold, *Die frühen Wettiner*, 349–61 and Harald Winkel, “Die Genealogia Wettinensis: Ein Zeugnis dynastischen und monastischen Selbstverständnisses im Hochmittelalter,” *Neues Archiv für sächsische Geschichte* 70 (2000): 1–31.

suis et Alberto marchione pluribusque liberis viris et ministerialibus, condigne in ecclesia beati Petri sepelitur.

[Margrave Conrad erected from its foundations a church, which had been begun by his brother, in honor of the blessed Peter on the Lauterberg and, having enriched it with abundant estates from his own property, gave rightful control and ownership of it to the Roman Church. He established there a community of canons regular to serve God. And he, renouncing completely all the vanities of the world, united with them as a pauper among paupers for true riches. He joined the community on November 30th and died in the [next] year on February 5th. When he died in 1156 [1157], he was buried worthily by Archbishop Wichmann of Magdeburg and Bishop Walo of Havelberg in the church of the blessed Peter in the presence of his sons and Margrave Albrecht and many freemen and ministerials.]⁴⁹

Whether the *Genealogia* was a direct source for the *Chronicon*'s version of Conrad's withdrawal is unclear. Regardless, because both texts were produced inside Wettin- and Lauterberg-influenced circles, it is not surprising that their perspectives on Conrad's conversion are quite similar.

Various modern historians have relied on the language of the *Chronicon*, the *Genealogia*, and the 1156 charter to conclude that Conrad's decision to become a lay brother at St. Peter's was driven by the margrave's firm conviction that he had led a sinful life.⁵⁰ For these scholars, the consistent emphasis on his religious motivations throughout all three texts is strong evidence for his pious intentions. Nevertheless, this position is not without its critics. Stefan Pätzold, who has written extensively on the house of Wettin, is more skeptical of these accounts of the margrave's conversion and argues that it is impossible to know whether the motivations ascribed to Conrad in these sources are accurate. He suggests, moreover, that political factors may have played a greater role in the decision than these texts claim.⁵¹

Recently, Michael Lindner has pushed this argument about politics even further.⁵² He relies on a fourth source, the *Annales Palidenses*, to construct an

⁴⁹ *Genealogia*, 228.

⁵⁰ Arnold, *Power and Property in Medieval Germany*, 151; Karlheinz Blaschke, "Markgraf Konrad von Meißen und die Kirche," *Konrad von Wettin und seine Zeit*, ed. Landesheimatbund Sachsen-Anhalt E. V. (Halle: Verlag Janos Stekovics, 1999), 87–96; here 92–93; Willy Hoppe, "Markgraf Konrad von Meissen: der Reichsfürst und der Gründer des wettinischen Staates," *Neues Archiv für sächsische Geschichte und Altertumskunde* 40 (1919): 1–53 [reprinted in *Die Mark Brandenburg, Wettin und Magdeburg: Ausgewählte Aufsätze*, ed. Herbert Ludat (Cologne and Graz: Böhlau Verlag, 1965), 153–206; here 185]; and Jörg Rogge, *Die Wettiner: Aufstieg einer Dynastie im Mittelalter* (Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2005), 35–36.

⁵¹ Pätzold, *Die frühen Wettiner*, 306–07.

⁵² Michael Lindner, "Eine Frage der Ehre: Markgraf Konrad von Wettin und Kaiser Friedrich Barbarossa," *Im Dienste der historischen Landeskunde: Beiträge zu Archäologie, Mittelalterforschung, Namenkunde und Museumsarbeit vornehmlich in Sachsen*, ed. Rainer Aurig, Reinhardt Butz, Ingolf

elaborate theory about Conrad's fall from grace at the court of Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa. This set of annals was compiled at the Saxon monastery of Pöhlde by a monk who was well-informed about events in the duchy of Saxony during the mid-twelfth century. Significantly, the *Annales Palidenses* are the only source to discuss Conrad's entry into St. Peter's not written by an author with close connections to the Wettiner family and the Lauterberg house of canons.⁵³ According to the annals, "Conradus marchio pacis amator, autorem pacis Deum veneratus Ierusalem adierat, diesque suos cum honore deducens, novissime cum languore correptus esset, apud montem Ethereum communionem religiosorum expetiit" ("Margrave Conrad, lover of peace—who to venerate God the author of peace had gone to Jerusalem—in order to draw his days to a close with honor after he was seized by illness a short time ago, sought out the community of religious upon the Lauterberg").⁵⁴ Lindner, who acknowledges that the passage, if read literally, indicates that Conrad was ill when he became a lay brother, chooses to read the phrase "*languore correptus esset*" in a more figurative sense.⁵⁵ For Lindner, the *Annales Palidenses* reveal that Conrad entered the Lauterberg house of canons to preserve his honor as he became increasingly inactive in imperial affairs. The margrave was becoming politically insignificant because of his troubled relationship with Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa, and he therefore wanted to end his public career as gracefully as possible.

The Pöhlde annals, regardless of how the language of the passage concerning Conrad's withdrawal is interpreted, provide an account of the margrave's conversion that raises more questions than it answers. If the entry about Conrad is understood to mean that he was ill when he joined the religious community, it would certainly help to explain why the margrave died only two-and-one-half months into his stay. But why would the other sources for his withdrawal be silent on this issue? After all, the author of the *Annales Pegavienses* was more than willing to admit that Wiprecht of Groitzsch's deteriorating physical condition played a central role in his decision to join the community at Pegau.

The insistence by the *Chronicon Montis Sereni* and the *Genealogia Wettinensis* that Conrad's recognition of his own sinfulness was his only motivation for converting would thus seem to suggest that the passage in the Pöhlde annals should be read as Lindner has interpreted it. Religious communities were, by the twelfth century,

Gräßler, and André Thieme (Brehna: Sax-Verlag, 2002), 105–21.

⁵³ For a more detailed discussion of this source, see Lindner, "Eine Frage der Ehre," 107, and Hans-Werner Goetz, "'Konstruktion der Vergangenheit'. Geschichtsbewusstsein und 'Fiktionalität' in der hochmittelalterlichen Chronistik, dargestellt am Beispiel der *Annales Palidenses*," *Von Fakten und Fiktionen: Mittelalterliche Geschichtsdarstellungen und ihre kritische Aufarbeitung*, ed. Johannes Laudage (Cologne, Weimar, et al.: Böhlau Verlag, 2003), 225–57.

⁵⁴ *Annales Palidenses*, 90.

⁵⁵ Lindner, "Eine Frage der Ehre," 108.

no longer considered to be prisons or places of exile for dangerous political figures as they had been during the Carolingian period, when, for example, Duke Tassilo of Bavaria (748–88) was made to enter a monastery by order of Charlemagne.⁵⁶ If Conrad had joined St. Peter's on the Lauterberg because of political differences with the emperor, therefore, one would not expect this to be stated openly anywhere in the sources. But is such a complicated explanation for Conrad's conversion justified by the brief and seemingly straightforward passage in the *Annales Palidenses*?

I see no simple solution to the problem of how to interpret the sources for Conrad's withdrawal from the secular world. Before turning to other matters, however, it is worthwhile to consider one additional piece of evidence for the margrave's conversion that deserves more attention than it has received. The lengthy entry concerning Conrad's final days and months in the *Chronicon Montis Sereni* includes this extraordinary statement, already quoted above: "that the Lord saw fit to free him from the temptations of this world in the beginning of his conversion, while he was living in a spirit of fervor, was an act of God." Most historians who have discussed the withdrawal of the margrave have not commented on this passage. Pätzold, one of the few who does, understands it to mean that Conrad found his time in the religious house difficult.⁵⁷ The more likely meaning, however, is that the canons of St. Peter were relieved that their founder had died so soon after joining their community. Conrad seems not to have been as fully committed to the religious life as the canons may have hoped, since the chronicler explains that "when Conrad saw before him his sons strong with princely grace and his ministerials glittering with the riches of the world and worldly pomp, if not for an act of God, he might have happily recalled his spirit from the quiet of the monastery that he had chosen."

This passage does not bring us any closer to understanding Conrad's motivations. But it does reveal that the idealized image of Conrad's conversion provided by the *Chronicon* earlier in its description of the margrave's final days was known to be inaccurate by the members of the religious community during the early thirteenth century. In 1156, the canons likely had little choice but to

⁵⁶ Stuart Airlie, "Narratives of Triumph and Rituals of Submission: Charlemagne's Mastering of Bavaria," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th series, 9 (1999): 93–119; here 115–16, and more generally Mayke de Jong, "Monastic Prisoners or Opting Out? Political Coercion and Honour in the Frankish Kingdoms," *Topographies of Power in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Mayke de Jong and Frans Theuvs. *The Transformation of the Roman World*, 6 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 291–328.

⁵⁷ Pätzold, "Das Lauterberger Erbe," 9–10. The only other historian I have found who comments seriously on these final sentences is Wolfgang Kirsch, "Leitgedanken der Chronik vom Petersberg und die Wettiner," *Konrad von Wettin und seine Zeit*, ed. Landesheimatbund Sachsen-Anhalt E. V. (Halle: Verlag Janos Stekovics, 1999), 35–53. Kirsch, however, is more interested in analyzing the language of this passage than in considering what the passage reveals about Conrad's conversion.

welcome Conrad into their house regardless of his motives, a situation that perhaps prompted the community on the Lauterberg to turn in later years to written sources to craft an elaborate, more positive story of his conversion.

The efforts by the author of the *Chronicon Montis Sereni* to portray Conrad's withdrawal in as pious a light as possible highlight one of the central difficulties for historians interested in understanding the late-in-life conversions of medieval noblemen. As the cases of both Conrad of Wettin and Wiprecht of Groitzsch reveal, monks and canons writing inside the religious houses into which lords withdrew included in their works numerous elements that reflect the common interests of religious communities. The authors of the *Annales Pegavienses* and the *Chronicon* emphasize how the two nobles, as they sensed their impending deaths, recognized the impact that their sinful lives as secular lords would have on their chances for salvation. Each of the noblemen therefore made the decision to enter a religious community—with the assistance of local Church leaders who could insure the seriousness of their commitment to the religious life. The two sources then discuss that critical moment when the lords set aside token possessions that bound them to the lay world—a sword in Wiprecht's case, clothes in Conrad's—and accepted the monastic habit. In both instances, this moment also involved the donation of property to the religious communities, a point the authors chose to include in order to strengthen their houses' claims to those lands. According to the chroniclers, once Wiprecht and Conrad had taken their vows and had entered their monasteries, both embraced their new roles with fervor: Wiprecht practiced obedience and Conrad embraced poverty. Finally, after each had died, he was buried inside the monastic church next to his wife and other relatives.

All of these similarities help to create an image of the two lords as models of pious noble behavior who followed the proper and expected path as they made their conversions to the spiritual life. The actions, strategies, and motivations of these noblemen were therefore obscured by monastic chroniclers whose principal goal in writing was to promote the interests of their own communities, not to provide reliable biographical information about these nobles.⁵⁸ The authors of the

⁵⁸ For the complex relationships between monastic communities and nobles, as these relationships are reflected in the monastic sources, see, for example, Otto Gerhard Oexle, "Die 'sächsische Welfenquelle' als Zeugnis der welfischen Hausüberlieferung," *Deutsches Archiv* 24 (1968): 435–97; Oexle, "Adliges Selbstverständnis und seine Verknüpfung mit dem liturgischen Gedenken—das Beispiel der Welfen," *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 134 (1986): 47–75; Gerd Althoff, "Anlässe zur schriftlichen Fixierung adligen Selbstverständnisses," *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 134 (1986): 34–46; Althoff, "Causa scribendi und Darstellungsabsicht: Die Lebensbeschreibungen der Königin Mathilde und andere Beispiele," *Litterae Medii Aevi: Festschrift für Johanne Autenrieth*, ed. Michael Borgolte and Herrad Spilling (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 1988),

Annales and *Chronicon* dedicated such time and attention to shaping the stories of these lords' conversions because Wiprecht and Conrad were the founders and leading patrons of the monasteries they entered. Their careers were therefore inextricably intertwined with the early histories of these religious communities. Moreover, their tombs were prominent features inside the monastic churches at Pegau and the Lauterberg and were thus daily reminders to the communities' members of their contributions to the two religious houses. Both authors acknowledge these strong connections between founder and religious house when they remind their readers in their accounts of the lords' final days of the noblemen's longstanding relationships with the communities.⁵⁹

Fortunately, the various topoi and conventions that appear in these monastic accounts do not obscure all the details of the late-in-life conversions of these German nobles. The stories of these noblemen's final days are not outright fabrications; they merely contain falsified elements that the chroniclers included for what were considered justifiable reasons.⁶⁰ After all, neither a lord, his family nor the members of his monastic community wanted his imperfections and weaknesses to be at the center of how he was memorialized.⁶¹ The emphasis on the lords' piety is therefore not surprising. As the analysis of Wiprecht and Conrad's conversions nevertheless demonstrates, careful reading of the sources—while it cannot answer all of the questions historians might like to ask—can shed light on the complex circumstances surrounding noblemen's withdrawals. In the case of Wiprecht of Groitzsch, his lineage's precarious political position in the wake of his defeat at the hands of Duke Lothar of Saxony in 1123 led him to remain in the world—despite his rapidly-declining health—until his final moments. In the case of Conrad of Wettin, his relationship with his five sons, his situation at the court of Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa, and his health all may have played roles in his conversion. At the very least, therefore, what both of these examples reveal,

117–33, and Althoff, "Geschichtsbewußtsein durch Memorialüberlieferung," *Hochmittelalterliches Geschichtsbewußtsein im Spiegel nichthistoriographischer Quellen*, ed. Hans-Werner Goetz (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998), 85–100.

⁵⁹ It is important to note that neither of these chroniclers dedicate much space to the final days of any of Wiprecht's and Conrad's immediate family members, including their heirs, further highlighting the significance of these two lords' withdrawals and deaths.

⁶⁰ For similar observations, see Herbert Edward John Cowdrey, "Death-bed Testaments," *Fälschungen im Mittelalter. Teil IV: Diplomatische Fälschungen (II)*, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Schriften*, 33, IV (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1988), 703–24; here 723, and Hans Martin Schaller, "Der Kaiser stirbt," *Tod im Mittelalter*, ed. Anno Borst, et al. (Constance: Universitätsverlag Konstanz, 1993), 59–75; here 60.

⁶¹ Lindner, "Eine Frage der Ehre," 106 and Timothy Reuter, "Nobles and Others: The Social and Cultural Expression of Power Relations in the Middle Ages," *Nobles and Nobility in Medieval Europe: Concepts, Origins, Transformations*, ed. Anne J. Duggan (Woodbridge, Suffolk, and Rochester, NY: Boydell, 2000), 85–98; here 90.

despite their problematic source bases, is that the withdrawal of a nobleman into his monastic foundation was not a monocausal event. Familial, political, and medical factors all played roles in these conversions.

The place of piety in these late-in-life withdrawals also must be taken into account. Admittedly, the chroniclers' efforts to convince their audiences that the conversions of Wiprecht and Conrad conformed to idealized images of monastic piety should be viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism given what else we know about these lords' withdrawals. This does not mean, however, that piety did not play a role in these conversions. Noblemen may well have had a different concept of piety in their minds when they withdrew, a secular notion of piety that did not accord exactly with monastic ideals but which emphasized first and foremost dramatic acts of penance in order to atone for a lifetime of sins.⁶² The disparity between monastic and lay ideals of poverty can be seen, moreover, in the general status of the *conversi*, or lay brothers, who were attached to monastic houses; these men frequently occupied an ambiguous position within these religious communities since they did not participate in the holy offices but were expected to follow many of the other rules of the monastic life.

While some of these lay brothers were criticized for their laziness and lack of commitment, others drew the ire of their communities for other reasons.⁶³ Many young noble converts reportedly shocked the members of their monastic houses because of their over-zealousness and their willingness to perform menial tasks that monks and canons of noble blood were not expected to perform.⁶⁴ Older nobles who withdrew to religious houses likely had little if any understanding of how monks, canons, and lay brothers actually behaved inside their religious houses, and these lords may therefore have considered their behavior appropriately pious—even if the monks or canons in their communities saw it differently.

There is another reason why piety must not be overlooked as a significant factor in these late-in-life withdrawals: not every old noble converted during the Middle Ages. Joel T. Rosenthal observes in his study of old age in late medieval England that members of the fifteenth-century peerage only rarely "turned to religion and

⁶² For an excellent discussion of the nature of the piety of some twelfth-century laymen, see David Crouch, "The troubled deathbeds of Henry I's servants: death, confession, and secular conduct in the twelfth century," *Albion* 34 (Spring 2002): 24–36.

⁶³ For the problems lay brothers could sometimes pose for religious communities, see Constable, *The Reformation of the Twelfth Century*, 79–80 and Ernst Tresp, "Laien im Kloster. Das hochmittelalterliche Reformmönchtum unter dem Ansturm der Adelskonversionen," *Pfaffen und Laien—ein mittelalterlicher Antagonismus?*, ed. Eckart Conrad Lutz and Ernst Tresp (Freiburg i. Ü: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, 1999), 33–56.

⁶⁴ Murray, *Reason and Society in the Middle Ages*, 390–93.

religious activity” late in their lives.⁶⁵ Even in the twelfth century, clear patterns of conversion are difficult to discern, suggesting that those nobles who chose to withdraw to monasteries had their own reasons for doing so. It is especially striking that family traditions of conversion did not seem to develop. None of Conrad of Wettin’s five sons withdrew to monastic foundations. And Count Berthold II of Andechs, the son of the aforementioned Count Berthold I who became a lay brother at Dießen, was still active politically in the months leading up to his own death in 1188—when he was at least seventy years of age.⁶⁶ The generation of German nobles that rose to power during the Church reform movements of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries thus may well have felt a stronger urge to convert to the religious life than later generations.⁶⁷ At the very least, as the career of Duke Welf VI of Spoleto (ca. 1115–1191)—who famously spent his final years enjoying a life of debauchery with wine, women and song on his lands in Swabia—suggests, different twelfth-century German noblemen must have had very different perspectives on how to spend their last days on earth.⁶⁸

If a strong sense of lay piety was indeed a central factor in the withdrawals of nobles during the opening decades of the twelfth century, why did they not follow in the footsteps of the saintly Gottfried of Cappenberg and abandon the secular world while still young men? To answer this question, it is helpful to consider the case of one more noble convert, Count Ludwig II of Thuringia († 1123). Though the sources for the early part of his career are extremely sparse, it appears likely that Ludwig was already active in politics in the 1070s, at the latest the early 1080s.⁶⁹ This suggests he was in his late fifties, but more likely his sixties or early seventies, at the time of his death. Twelfth-century sources blandly report that he died as a monk within a year or two of his withdrawal from the secular world.⁷⁰ But later works from Ludwig II’s own monastic foundation at Reinhardsbrunn, which he established in 1085, provide more details. The *De ortu principum Thuringie*, which

⁶⁵ Joel T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 134.

⁶⁶ Edmund Oefele, *Geschichte der Grafen von Andechs* (Innsbruck: Verlag der Wagner’schen Universitäts-Buchhandlung, 1877), 150.

⁶⁷ A more systematic analysis of noble conversion during the Middle Ages would need to be done before it would be possible to conclude more definitively that generational change impacted the patterns of such conversions.

⁶⁸ For Welf VI, see Bernd Schneidmüller, *Die Welfen: Herrschaft und Erinnerung* (Stuttgart, Berlin, et al.: W. Kohlhammer, 2000), 201–02.

⁶⁹ Helmut Assing, “Der Aufstieg der Ludowinger in Thüringen,” *Brandenburg, Anhalt und Thüringen im Mittelalter: Askanier und Ludowinger beim Aufbau fürstlicher Territorialherrschaften*. Helmut Assing, *zum 65. Geburtstag des Autors*, ed. Tilo Köhn, Lutz Partenheimer and Uwe Zietmann (Cologne, Weimar, et al.: Böhlau Verlag, 1997), 241–94; here 249–50.

⁷⁰ *Annalista Saxo*, 759; *Annales Pegavienses*, 254; and *Annales Palidenses*, 77.

was written in 1234/1235 but is based on a lost Reinhardsbrunn source from around the year 1200, includes the following passage about Ludwig:

. . . Ludewicus comes de sue anime salute deliberans Stephanum Halberstadensem episcopum et Giselbertum pluribus abbaciis preminentem humiliter adiit atque sue archana confessionis eis aperiens ipsorum stare consiliis devote sponndit. Qui agnito cordis sui secreto sanum ac tale ipsi dedere consilium scilicet ut alicubi in sui proprietate memoriam beate virginis sanctique Iohannis evangeliste festive statueret atque inibi cenobium sub regula Benedicti erigens, seque renunciatis omnibus secularibus ibidem monachum futurum promitteret. Qui sanissimis acquiescens consiliis in loco Reinhersburnensi omnipotenti Deo ut videtur aulam extruens omnibus quibus potuit modis eam extulit atque iuxta conductum suum ibidem in veste contemptibili et monachali habitu novissimum exalans spiritum in pace quiescit.

[. . . Count Ludwig, reflecting on the condition of his soul, humbly approached Bishop Stephen of Halberstadt and Giselbert, who was preminent among the numerous abbots, and laying bare to them the secrets of his confession, promised to stand by their counsels devotedly. The churchmen, understanding the secret of his heart, gave sound and excellent counsel to him, namely that he ought to set up somewhere on his property an altar dedicated joyously to the blessed virgin and to Saint John the Evangelist. And they counseled that, after erecting in that place a monastery under the rule of St. Benedict, he should promise to renounce all secular things and to become a monk there in the future. Ludwig agreed with these most sound counsels, and he constructed a church at Reinhardsbrunn for almighty God, as seems proper. He advanced his foundation in every way he could. And, in accordance with his promise, in that very place, while wearing contemptible clothing and the monastic habit, he exhaled a completely new spirit and passed away in peace.]⁷¹

Because no extant source from the eleventh century provides evidence for Ludwig's establishment of the religious community at Reinhardsbrunn, the count's promise to withdraw eventually to the monastery may have been the invention of monastic authors writing much later who knew, with the advantage of hindsight, that Ludwig died as a monk at his foundation.⁷² However, this seems unlikely. Already during Ludwig's lifetime, sources implicate him in the murder of a local nobleman in the year 1085, and this is likely "the secret of his heart" referred to in

⁷¹ Stefan Tebruck, *Die Reinhardsbrunner Geschichtsschreibung im Hochmittelalter: Klösterliche Traditionsbildung zwischen Fürstenhof, Kirche und Reich* (Frankfurt, Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 2001), 404–05. There is also a longer version of this story, which survives in the fourteenth-century *Cronica Reinhardsbrunnensis*, ed. Oswald Holder-Egger. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Scriptores*, 30,1 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1896), 525–26. For the relationship between these two texts, see Tebruck's detailed study.

⁷² Ludwig seems to have waited until very late in his career to withdraw to Reinhardsbrunn. The *Cronica Reinhardsbrunnensis*, 530–31 indicates he was still active politically in 1116 and did not withdraw from secular life until 15 August 1122 at the earliest.

the passage of the *De ortu principum Thuringie*.⁷³ Like Gottfried of Cappenberg, therefore, Ludwig seems to have felt compelled to turn to the religious life because of an egregious sin. But unlike Gottfried, the count of Thuringia chose to wait almost four decades after committing this sin before converting. In the interim, Ludwig established Thuringia as one of the most powerful lordships in the German empire and fathered seven children who further insured that Ludwig's family would dominate imperial politics for much of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.⁷⁴ For Ludwig, therefore, a desire to atone for his sins was counterbalanced by the social and political forces of his day—forces that saw noblemen across Germany building castles, establishing lordships and founding lineages.⁷⁵ Count Gottfried of Cappenberg was willing to ignore these social and political currents, but as the examples of Wiprecht, Conrad and Ludwig show, most nobles were not. No matter how strong of a desire these lords might have felt to convert to the religious life, they first had to do everything in their power to secure the position of their families. Conversion had to wait until they were older and were no longer physically and/or mentally capable of managing effectively their responsibilities as lords.⁷⁶

As Albrecht Classen explains in his introduction to this volume, there is much about old age in the medieval and Renaissance periods that remains unknown. The principal reason for this lacuna is that the subject of old age has generated relatively little interest among previous generations of scholars. But the straightforward act of making old age the focus of intensive new research will not lead to the filling of all the gaps in our knowledge. The nature of the extant sources inevitably stands as a significant roadblock on the path toward understanding how people in the Middle Ages experienced old age. The active careers of many of the leading noblemen of the twelfth-century German empire can be reconstructed from a broad range of narrative sources and charters that make it possible for modern historians to analyze their political, military, social, economic, and cultural roles in society. But once these active careers came to an end, these same lords ceased to attract the attention of such a diverse group of authors. The withdrawal of an aged nobleman into a monastic community was not a moment of great significance in the eyes of most people in the empire, especially if he had heirs who

⁷³ Tebruck, *Die Reinhardsbrunner Geschichtsschreibung*, 402.

⁷⁴ Assing, "Der Aufstieg der Ludowinger in Thüringen."

⁷⁵ For an overview of these forces, see Benjamin Arnold, *Princes and Territories in Medieval Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁷⁶ It is noteworthy that none of the sources that discuss the conversions of Wiprecht, Conrad, and Ludwig specifically identify old age as a factor in their withdrawals into monastic communities. Nevertheless, the physical and mental decline that accompanied old age must surely have played a role in some monastic conversions. See Reuter, "Nobles and Others," 90.

were fully prepared to assume his place. When a nobleman left behind the secular world, therefore, only the monastic community into which he withdrew showed any real concern about his final days. Because that religious house had its own interests to protect and promote, the depiction of the aged lord preserved in the monastery's sources tends to be an idealized image of monastic piety. As a result, the extant evidence provides only occasional, tantalizing glimpses of the complex set of factors that stood behind the late-in-life religious conversions of German noblemen.

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Medieval Latin Meditations on Old Age: Rhetoric, Autobiography, and Experience

Two issues confront the scholar wanting to find literary expressions of the personal experience of old age in the Latin Middle Ages. The first is that, by and large, the images, vocabulary, and attitudes we find in Medieval Latin texts on old age are drawn very closely from classical Latin sources (which were in turn indebted to ancient Greek models).¹ Of these, the two most influential approaches in the Middle Ages were those of Cicero and Seneca. Cicero wrote a dialogue known as the *De senectute*, or alternatively as the *Cato Maior*, in which the renowned figure of Cato the Elder expounded to two younger enquirers the manifold benefits of old age, not the least of which was the freedom from the needs and wants of both career and bodily compulsions to allow a focus on developing true virtue.² Georges Minois has argued that this text, with its relatively positive outlook on the declining years, is somewhat anomalous in a classical world otherwise filled with negative approaches to old age;³ nevertheless, its conclusions were clearly amenable to a Christianized reading, and it became one of the most popular of the classical approaches to old age in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, Seneca, a Stoic, advocated in his *Epistulae morales*, written to his friend Lucilius, putting a short sharp end to old age before serious physical and

¹ See for example Tim G. Parkin, "Ageing in Antiquity: Status and Participation," *Old Age from Antiquity to Post-Modernity*, ed. Paul Johnson and Pat Thane (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 19–42, for the influence of Aristotle and Plato on Roman writers.

² See Cicero, *Cato Maior De senectute*, ed. J. G. F. Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Cicero's dialogue was written early in 44 BC; as Powell notes (2), Cicero would then have been sixty-two years old (and recognized as a *senex*), and was still grieving over the death of his daughter the previous year.

³ See Georges Minois, *History of Old Age from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (1987; Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 105: "Cicero's *De senectute*, the sole Latin work exclusively dedicated to the old, is all the more remarkable in consequence. It may seem strange that Roman civilization, which was so hard on the old, should have produced this remarkable and in many ways unique apologia for old age."

mental decline began.⁴ In addition there were the elegiac approach of Ovid (especially his poems written while in exile in the years following AD 8), the satirical approaches to old age expressed by Horace (*Ars poetica*, written during the reign of Augustus) and Juvenal (especially his Satire X, written around the end of the first century AD), both of whom viewed old age as a source of disgust and cruel humor, and a tradition of purely medical approaches to aging stretching back to Greek scholarship, including the work of Hippocrates and Galen.

The second issue arising from a desire to find genuine expressions of the nature of aging in the Middle Ages is the question of the writing self and the authenticity of the first-person voice in medieval literature. In their chapters in this volume, Valerie L. Garver and Jonathan R. Lyon have noted the difficulties of drawing a true picture of old age in the Middle Ages from historical sources, yet as this chapter endeavors to show, literary sources are equally fraught with interpretational complexities. In part this is due to the nature of written texts in the Middle Ages, which so often had a didactic, exemplary function. Evelyn Birge Vitz notes that literary traditions influenced the apparently unmediated voice of the author because "[w]hen speaking of himself, the writer was expected to transform himself, both esthetically and morally, into a symbol of humanity as a whole, or, at the very least, of an entire class of men," and she adds that this was a "typically medieval phenomenon: human experience is presented in its archetypal aspect, not as an individualized sequence of actual events . . . the symbolic, exemplary side of things takes precedence over the specific case."⁵ The problem of the

⁴ See L. Annaei Senecae, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, ed. L. D. Reynolds, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965). Seneca wrote his letters to Lucilius in around the years AD 63–64, before his enforced suicide in AD 65, when he was in his late sixties. On suicide as a means for avoiding old age see Ep. XII.10: "patent undique ad libertatem viae multae, breves faciles. Agamus deo gratias, quod nemo in vita teneri potest: calcare ipsas necessitates licet"; Ep. LXX.5: "sapiens vivet quantum debet, non quantum potest . . . diligenter circumspicit, numquid illic desinendum sit. Nihil existimat sua referre, faciat finem an accipiat, tardius fiat an citius"; also the entire Ep. LXXVII. Cicero, on the other hand, commends seeing out the natural course of one's life: *De senectute*, XX.72: "ita fit ut illud breve vitae reliquum nec avidè appetendum senibus nec sine causa deserendum sit." But note that in other regards, Seneca's writings on old age remain noticeably indebted to Cicero's *De senectute*.

⁵ "The I of the *Roman de la Rose*," *Genre* 6 (1973): 49–75; here 51; see also Leo Spitzer, "Note on the Poetic and the Empirical 'I' in Medieval Authors," *Traditio* 4 (1946): 414–22; here 416: "It was a trifling matter who the empirical person behind this 'I' actually was . . . All the modern misunderstandings on the part of commentators of the 'biographical approach' school are due to their confusion of the 'poetic I' with the empirical or pragmatical 'I' of the poet." See also Albrecht Classen, *Die autobiographische Lyrik des europäischen Spätmittelalters: Studien zu Hugo von Montfort, Oswald von Wolkenstein, Antonio Pucci, Charles d'Orléans, Thomas Hoccleve, Michel Beheim, Hans Rosenplüt und Alfoso Alvarez de Villasandino*. Amsterdamer Publikationen zur Sprache und Literatur, 91 (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, 1991); Burt Kimmelman, *The Poetics of Authorship in the Later Middle Ages: The Emergence of the Modern Literary Persona*. Studies in the Humanities. Literature—Politics—Society, 21 (New York, Washington, D.C., et al.: Peter Lang, 1996).

authorial self becomes even more acute when considered in conjunction with medieval representations of old age, as a number of scholars have outlined the difficult psychological aspect of old age, in which the sense of self can become fragmented between differing notions of age,⁶ and in which the authorial self can feel disambiguated from the aged self.⁷

Scholars must thus confront an epistemological dilemma: as Anouk Janssen reminds us in her paper in this volume, “[o]ld age is mainly represented by topoi, literary and visual clichés,” which do not necessarily convey “a direct reflection of social reality” or “the way in which old age was experienced.” On the other hand, as Paul Edward Dutton argues, while we must acknowledge senescence as a poetic *topos*, we should not therefore neglect to consider what might lie behind its employment in a particular text, time, and place.⁸ In his Introduction to this volume, Albrecht Classen notes that these issues surrounding poetic individuality, literary tradition, and authorial intent beset vernacular writers dealing with old age throughout the Middle Ages. The aim of this chapter is to determine the situation that obtained with regard to expressions of old age in Medieval Latin literature. Can we hear authentic medieval voices lamenting (or even praising?) their personal experiences of old age, or are all such Medieval Latin discourses necessarily indebted to classical examples and designed solely for moralizing purposes?

That the latter option is all too possible is revealed by the treatise *De miseria humane conditionis* (On the wretchedness of the human condition), written by Cardinal Lotario dei Segni, later to become Pope Innocent III, in 1195. Its chapter on the evils of old age (“De incommodis senectutis”) is an excoriating account of the physical and mental decline suffered by the human body in its later years and

⁶ See Aki C. L. Beam, “‘Should I as Yet Call You Old?’: Testing the Boundaries of Female Old Age in Early Modern England,” *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe: Cultural Representations*, ed. Erin Campbell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 95–116; here 114. Beam argues that there are four distinct modes of aging: physical, functional, biological or medical, and chronological or calendar, and she notes that “[t]hese four types of age began at different points and proceeded at different rates; together, they are responsible for the gap between what gerontologists call psychological old age (when a person considered themselves old) and cultural old age (when a person was regarded and treated as old by their contemporaries).” This situation is also discussed by Albrecht Classen in his Introduction to this volume.

⁷ See Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: ‘Winter Clothes Us in Shadow and Pain,’* trans. Yael Lotan (1995; London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 46: “This statement expresses a certain psychological truth—the old person’s alienation from his/her body . . . The poet addresses his old body as though it were something outside himself. It is a *persona* that has been imposed on him. Present-day writers also describe the old person’s ability to identify with his/her body. The image in the mirror appears to be a stranger.”

⁸ See “Beyond the Topos of Senescence: The Political Problems of Aged Carolingian Rulers,” *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), 75–94; here 75.

was enormously influential throughout medieval literature on old age,⁹ yet it can hardly have sprung from Lotario's own personal experience, having been written when he was only thirty-five years old.¹⁰ Perhaps, then, the key lies in discussing Medieval Latin texts that are ostensibly written in a first-person voice by authors in or nearing old age. The texts discussed in this chapter have been selected to fit these parameters, and range in date of composition from late antiquity through the High Middle Ages and proto-humanism to the dawn of the early modern era.

Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, one of the most influential late antique works in medieval literary and intellectual culture,¹¹ was written around the year 522 when Boethius, then aged in his mid-forties, was imprisoned awaiting sentence of death. The thesis of Boethius's text is that, initially given to despair at his situation, he is comforted by philosophy. Accordingly, he opens his work with a poetic lament about his circumstances, in which he describes the forces besieging him. Not surprisingly, given his abrupt reversal in status from civil pre-eminence to captivity, a key assailant is fickle Fortune (1M1, 16; "male fida fortuna"), but, more intriguingly, old age also stands accused, its arrival, Boethius claims, hastened by his sufferings:

Gloria felicitis olim uiridisque iuuentae,
solantur maesti nunc mea fata senis.
Venit enim properata malis inopina senectus
et dolor aetatem iussit inesse suam.

Intempestiui funduntur uertice cani
et tremit effeto corpore laxa cutis. (1M1, 7–12)¹²

[Once the glory of a happy and flourishing youth, they [i.e. songs] now relieve the ill-fortune of my sad old age. For unexpected old age comes hurrying with evils, and compels sorrow to be attendant upon my age. Grey hairs sprout forth untimely from my crown, and my loose skin trembles upon my worn-out body.]

⁹ See Lotario dei Segni (Pope Innocent III), *De miseria condicionis humane*, ed. and trans. Robert E. Lewis. The Chaucer Library (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1978), 3–5.

¹⁰ But note there is confusion in the manuscripts over the age which Lotario gives as marking a possible end point of the human life: in some manuscripts this is given as forty, whereas in others it is fifty or sixty—see Lotharii Cardinalis (Innocentii III), *De miseria humane conditionis*, ed. Michele Maccarrone, (Lugano: Thesaurus Mundi, 1956), 16, notes to lines 2–3. If the age were originally forty in Lotario's text, it might be possible that at thirty-five he could conceive of himself as being near the end of his life, but even so, he could hardly have suffered personally the litany of ills he mentions here.

¹¹ See John Marenbon, *Boethius*. Great Medieval Thinkers (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 172–82.

¹² All citations from the *Consolation* are from Anicii Manlii Severini Boethii, *Philosophiae Consolatio*, ed. Ludovic Bieler. Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, 94 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1957).

With their repetition of ideas of the unexpectedness of the physical signs of old age, these lines reveal precisely the psychological disjunction mentioned earlier between chronological age and biological age. It is tempting to find in this slippage between avowed expectation and reported reality a moment of autobiographical truth, and there has been a history of reading Boethius's authorial voice here as both sincere and reflective of his own experience.¹³ Nevertheless, this temptation should be resisted. As John Marenbon reminds us, the *Consolation* is never less than rhetorical, the speaking voice of Boethius always a literary construction.¹⁴ Moreover, this apparently personal sense of the unexpectedness of old age is a trope which is not only drawn from, but also explicitly repudiated by Cicero.¹⁵

More important, Boethius himself, in the lines of verse that precede the passage quoted above, gives us clues to the traditional, rhetorical nature of his lament: he opens by declaring that he has long derived comfort from composing songs (1M1, 1; "Carmina qui quondam studio florente peregi"), he states that his cheeks are now furrowed with real tears (1M1, 4; "veris . . . fletibus"), and he expresses his thanks that the Muses have not abandoned him in his times of trouble, but have accompanied him into exile (1M1, 6; "nostrum comites prosequerentur iter"). This constitutes a highly explicit statement of Boethius's artistic persona: that is, he has a long experience and facility in composing verse,¹⁶ the declared veracity of his present tears merely draws attention to the possibility that he is accustomed to causing artificial tears to flow, and his praise of the Muses' loyalty means that they are here with him now while he composes this poem, or in other words, that this poem is an artistic construct.

The artificial nature of the lament is furthered by an understanding of the development of the *Consolation's* argument. It is necessary, as Luigi Alfonsi points out, that the opening poem appears to be highly personal, self-oriented, and spoken by Boethius himself, in order that the second poem, which is reportedly

¹³ See for example Edward Kennard Rand, "On the Composition of Boethius' 'Consolatio Philosophiae,'" *Boethius*, ed. Manfred Fuhrmann and Joachim Gruber (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1984), 249–77; here 252 (reprinted from *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 15 [1904]: 1–28).

¹⁴ Marenbon, *Boethius*, 99: "this is not to say that the states of mind attributed to the character Boethius need ever have been those of the real Boethius. Boethius the character is a persona, very possibly fictional in many of his thoughts and feelings, although sharing the events of Boethius the author's life. It is important that the two figures be kept distinct."

¹⁵ Cicero, *De senectute*, II.4: "obrepere aiunt eam citius quam putavissent: primum coegit eos falsum putare? qui enim citius adulescentiae senectus quam pueritiae adulescentia obrepit?"

¹⁶ See Luigi Alfonsi, "Boethius als Dichter," *Boethius*, ed. Fuhrmann and Gruber, 407–22; here 407, where he points out that Boethius's opening statement that he had once composed poems is itself stylistically indebted to a line from Virgil (this paper first published in *Antiquitas* 9 [1954]: 4–13, and translated from the Italian by Erika Schindel); see also Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 115.

spoken by the figure of Philosophy, can draw Boethius away from the very distractions of poetry to more serious matters.¹⁷ Boethius's art thus needs to be ostensibly personal in these opening poetic lines for the text as a whole to function.

Finally, we must recognize that precisely what seems most personal in these lines on old age is drawn from a classical source—Ovid's *Tristia*:

Iam mea cycneas imitantur tempora plumas,
inficit et nigras alba senecta comas.
iam subeunt anni fragiles et inertior aetas,
iamque parum firmo me mihi ferre grave est. (IV.VIII. 1–4)

[Now my temples resemble the feathers of a swan, and white old age tints my black hairs. Now the fragile years and a more sluggish age draw near, and already it is difficult for me, too little strong, to support myself.]

What is particularly significant here is that when Ovid wrote these verses he was suffering the despair of exile—just as Boethius was in exile when he composed the *Consolation*. We need to consider, therefore, whether Boethius's lines on old age, indebted as they are to Ovid, constitute less an analysis of aging, and more a trope of exile, using the sense of exile from one's body that comes with age as indicative of physical civil exile.¹⁸ In short, the lines on old age that open Boethius's *Consolation*, despite their apparently personal nature, turn out to be no such thing: we can find here no personal experience of aging.

A more extensive, and apparently more personal, expression of advancing old age is found in the six *Elegies* of Boethius's younger contemporary, Maximianus. Maximianus opens his first elegy with an invocation to old age, demanding to know why it refuses to finish him off when he is now no longer himself:

Aemula quid cessas finem properare senectus?
cur et in hoc fesso corpore tarda uenis? . . .
non sum qui fueram: periit pars maxima nostri.
hoc quoque quod superest languor et horror habent.
(I, 1–2, 5–6)¹⁹

¹⁷ Alfonsi, "Boethius als Dichter," 408, 410. Note that Philosophy dismisses the "scenicas meretriculas" (histrionic little whores, i.e. the Muses) whom she finds clustered around Boethius: see Bieler, *Philosophiae Consolatio*, 2, lines 25–26.

¹⁸ On the similar contiguity, or even identification, of old age and exile in Ovid's later poetic works see Judith de Luce, "Ovid as an Idiographic Study of Creativity and Old Age," *Old Age in Greek and Latin Literature*, ed. Thomas M. Falkner and Judith de Luce (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 195–216; here 195: "reading his final poems requires that at some point we distinguish between the influence of old age and the influence of exile on his poetry, and that we consider whether the two may actually be synonymous in Ovid's mind."

¹⁹ All citations from the *Elegies* are from M. Petschenig, "Maximiani Elegiae ad fidem Codicis Etonensis," *Berliner Studien für klassische Philologie und Archaeologie* 11 (1890): 1–37.

[Grudging old age, why do you hold back from hastening to the end? And why do you come late to this tired body? . . . I am not now what I was: the greater part of who I was has perished, and weariness and dread have taken hold of what is left.]

With this explicit foregrounding of a sense of self, the impression is immediately set of an authentic, personal speaking voice. An apparently autobiographical recitation of Maximianus's youth then ensues, which serves to emphasize the truthful nature of the complaints of old age which succeed these reminiscences. With emotion Maximianus describes the collapse of his bodily senses and faculties, listing not only the usual ones attributed to old age (dimming eyes, fading hearing, failure of digestion, bladder problems), but others that seem more particular, more personal: "si libros repeto, duplex se littera findit" (1, 145; if I revisit my books, the letters split themselves in two). In despair Maximianus cries out at the loss of his bodily sensations, asking how he can know anything—even that he exists—if he can no longer trust his senses: "sensibus expertem quis superesse putet?" (1, 122): an explicit invocation of personal experience. Next he turns to the psychological and social ills of old age: anxiety, irritation, boredom, sleeplessness, fear, querulousness, mockery by the young, and the creeping miserliness that develops when wealth is hoarded. Throughout the two hundred lines of this lament devoted to the ills of old age, the overwhelming impression on the reader is of Maximianus's personal experience, as expressed in the first person, but closer consideration of the text shows that this is by no means the case: in fact, Maximianus's perspective rotates continually from the first-person singular (the personal), to the first-person plural ("we," where he depicts himself as generically one of the old), to the third person where he describes, more impersonally, and as though from observation alone, the behavior of the elderly.

Maximianus's second and fifth elegies deal with the trials and tribulations that beset the elderly in the field of love and sex. In the second elegy we receive an interesting, and all too rare, portrait of an aging woman, and one that differs from the usual physical abuse such women garner in Latin literature.²⁰ In fact, Lycoris, although getting on in years herself, is leaving Maximianus, since he has grown old and distasteful to her, while she remains still attractive and sexually desirous:

atque tamen — niuei circumdant tempora cani
et iam caeruleis inficit hora notis —
praestat adhuc nimiumque sibi pretiosa uidetur
atque annos mecum despicit illa suos:
et, fateor, primae retinet monimenta figurae
atque inter cineres condita flamma manet. (2, 25–30)

²⁰ Consider for example Horace's satiric treatment of aging former lovers in his Odes 1.25, 3.15, and 4.13; see Carol Clemeau Esler, "Horace's Old Girls: Evolution of a Topos", *Old Age in Greek and Latin Literature*, 172–82.

[and yet—although snow-white hairs crown her temples and time now stains her with darkened marks—she still stands forth before all and seems to herself of great worth and she contemns her years with me: and, I confess, she retains the curves of her earlier figure and amongst the ashes a preserved flame remains.]

In his fifth elegy, Maximianus becomes much more explicit about the sexual difficulties of an aged male, describing first the exertion that sexual intercourse has cost him and then, in some detail, his subsequent impotence:

set mihi prima quidem nox affuit ac sua soluit
munera, grandaeuo uix subeunda uiro.
proxima destituit uires uacuuque recessit
ardor et in uenerem segnis ut ante fui. (5, 47–50)

[but the first night was soon at hand and its debts were paid, although scarcely able to be sustained by a man of advanced age. The next night my strength abandoned me and my spent ardor departed, and in love I was inactive as before.]

The theme of old age is also present in the third and fourth elegies, although here it is not the key consideration, but merely provides an introduction to Maximianus's reminiscences of two loves of his youth. The collection ends with the very brief sixth elegy in which Maximianus returns to the present and calls a halt to his laments: "Claude precor miseras, aetas uerbosa, querelas. / numquid et hic uitium uis reserare tuum?" (6, 1–2; Draw to an end your wretched complaints, I beseech, wordy old age. Surely you do not wish to disclose your failings here?), before remarking that death lies in store for all, regardless of station in life, or even age: "hac pueri atque senes pariter iuuenesque feruntur" (6, 7; by this boys and old men equally, and youths, are taken off).

What then of the veracity of the personal experience ostensibly revealed in the *Elegies*? Maximianus's stories are highly personable, told as engaging narratives in an affable voice that immediately excites sympathy in the reader. Nevertheless, we must recall that Maximianus warns us in the opening lines of his first elegy that he has no small skill in both rhetoric and verse composition, and that he is particularly adept at literary deceit:

orator toto clarus in orbe fui.
saepe poetarum mendacia carmina finxi
et ueros titulos res mihi ficta dabat.
perorate percepi lite coronam
et merui linguae praemia grata meae. (1, 10–14)

[I was an orator celebrated throughout all the world. Often I composed the lying songs of poets and a fictional story brought me real renown. I won the crown for orating on a legal action and I merited rewards by virtue of my tongue.]

In the second elegy he points out that whatever other losses old age has imposed upon him, he has not lost the art of composition: “en, uersus facio et mollia dicta cano” (2, 64; look, I make verses and sing tender songs). The lament over impotence in the fifth elegy is so outrageous, full as it is of prurient details about the girl’s attempted ministrations and containing a long invocation by her addressed to Maximianus’s impotent member (“mentula”), that scholars have argued that it constitutes not an autobiographical recollection, but a satire, intended to relay an antifeminist message about the wantonness of women.²¹ It is, moreover, indebted to a classical tradition of laments over impotence, particularly Ovid’s *Amores* 3.7, which it follows very closely.²² We should particularly note that Maximianus ends his collection of elegies with the comment—which serves as a warning against too literal a reading of his foregoing words—that once he is dead, he will live on in this part or character he has created: “hac me defunctum uiuere parte puto” (6, 12). Finally, from a philological point of view, L. R. Lind reminds us that “almost every line in his poems parallels, echoes, or imitates some word, phrase, or line in another author.” Lind therefore cautions: “the effect on the reader who may not perceive his borrowings is still vivid and fresh and gives the impression of a lively talent working from personal as well as literary experience and materials.”²³ Thus, even with the wealth of apparently biographical material in these *Elegies* (and with no other extant information on Maximianus, we must rely on his words here alone), we cannot be certain that we have here a genuine late antique response to the experience of old age. As one of their earlier editors, Richard Webster, wrote over a century ago: “these elegies, even more than Ovid’s *Amores*, are not autobiographic but give dramatic descriptions of old age, and the personal allusions in them are not to be interpreted as historically true of their author.”²⁴

²¹ See Joseph Szövérfy, “Maximianus a Satirist?,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 72 (1968): 351–67; Szövérfy finds the same intent in the second elegy, despite its fairly positive representation of Lycoris, since the elegy indicates the sexual rapaciousness of women, regardless of their age.

²² It should be noted, however, that Maximianus does here explicitly impute his impotence to old age, whereas Ovid’s speaker clearly states that he is a young man suffering some kind of performance anxiety. The *Amores* were written when Ovid was in his twenties, and the speaker of 3.7 actually considers what old age will have in store for him, if he is impotent already in the prime of his youth: “Quae mihi ventura est, siquidem ventura, senectus, / cum desit numeris ipsa iuuenta suis?” (3.7.17–18). Similarly, in Petronius’s *Satyricon*, Encolpius is a young man who has been bewitched into impotence by Circe.

²³ Gabriele Zerbi, *Gerontocomia: On the Care of the Aged; and Maximianus, Elegies on Old Age and Love*, trans. L. R. Lind (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1988), 315. See similarly George R. Coffman, “Old Age from Horace to Chaucer: Some Literary Affinities and Adventures of an Idea,” *Speculum* 9 (1934): 249–77; here 251–52.

²⁴ *The Elegies of Maximianus*, ed. Richard Webster (Princeton, NJ: The Princeton Press, 1900), 8.

If late antiquity offers us no answers to the question of personal attitudes to old age, what of the high Middle Ages? In his study of literary depictions of the self, Gerald Bond notes the rise of a new literary movement based around the Loire Valley from the late eleventh century into the first decades of the twelfth century in which focus was placed on humanistic and verisimilitudinous descriptions of the self (which Bond calls "self-impersonation").²⁵ At the forefront of this movement we find Marbod of Rennes, a renowned poet of his age, who was originally from Anjou but became Bishop of Rennes in 1096. In around 1102, approaching his seventieth year,²⁶ Marbod composed a treatise in ten chapters (known for that reason as the *Liber decem capitulorum*) which deals with the range of human life. Amongst these, Chapter 5 is concerned with old age and is known, according to the heading given it in the *editio princeps* of 1524, as "De senectute" or "On Old Age."

Marbod begins his meditation on old age in Horatian style by declaring that "Aetatem vexant incommoda multa senilem, / Quae de mortali procedunt condicione" (5, 1–2; Many inconveniences trouble old age, which proceed from its mortal nature).²⁷ Moving from a description of the purely physical pains that wrack the body, Marbod paints telling vignettes, many drawn from Juvenal's Satire X, that characterize the unaesthetic nature of old age: bread must be soaked in milk and twisted in the toothless mouth, being swallowed rather than chewed (5, 24–25);²⁸ without teeth, the mouth cannot form its words properly, and the old person dashes his tongue uselessly and lispingly against his lips (5, 28–29); and the nose loses its sense of smell so that it cannot distinguish sweet incense from muck (5, 32–33). Marbod then moves to a characterization of the elderly as querulous, avaricious, and miserly: he unleashes a particularly satirical portrait of the old man carefully packing away provisions for future need while going without to his own detriment (5, 46–48).²⁹ He links these behavioral traits with the contemporary medical thinking on the aged body, namely that it suffers from an imbalance of the humors which makes it excessively cold, arguing that "gelidus sanguis senis

²⁵ Gerald Bond, *The Loving Subject: Desire, Eloquence, and Power in Romanesque France*. Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 1–17, esp. 7.

²⁶ In the opening line of the second chapter of the *Liber decem*, known as on "On Time and Age" ("De tempore et aevo"), Marbod gives this information: "Post decies sextum currit mihi septimus annus," (following my sixth decade, my seventieth year rushes towards me). All citations are taken from Marbodi *Liber decem capitulorum: Introduzione, testo critico e commento*, ed. Rosario Leotta (Rome: Herder, 1984), here 73, II.1.

²⁷ See Horace, *Ars poetica*, 169: "multa senem circumveniunt incommoda"; see similarly Cicero, *De senectute*, XXIII.84: "quid habet enim vita commodi? quid non potius laboris?"

²⁸ See Juvenal, Satire X, 200: "frangendus misero gingiva panis inermi."

²⁹ Compare Cicero, *De senectute*, XVIII.66: "avaritia vero senilis quid sibi velit non intelligo: potest enim quidquam esse absurdius quam quo viae minus restet, eo plus viatici quaerere?"; and Horace, *Ars poetica*, 170: "quaerit et inventis miser abstinet ac timet uti."

interiora coartat / Et timet expensas et eget ne possit egere" (5, 56–57; the icy blood of an old man contracts his insides and he fears expenses and goes without, lest he should go without). Marbod also expends several lines noting the loss of sexual enjoyment that is attendant upon the aged body, although it was a prime contention of Cicero's treatise that this was in fact a blessing:

Ergo voluptates aufert productior aetas
Corporis, enumerant quas inter commodi multi,
Inter quas fectur coitus vel maxima, cuius
Sera caloris egens aetas intercipit usum. (5, 58–61)

[Therefore more protracted age draws away the pleasures of the body, which many number amongst its comforts, amongst which sex is indeed held to be the greatest, the enjoyment of which late age, lacking in heat, precludes.]

After citing the Ciceronian adage that "Cumque senectutem cupiant omnes adipisci, / Accusant omnes et detestantur adeptam" (5, 63–64; although all desire to arrive at old age, they all reprove and denounce it once achieved),³⁰ Marbod abruptly shifts focus, at almost precisely the half-way point of the chapter, suddenly adopting a Ciceronian approach to the value of old age.³¹

Thus he declares that "mihi multa placent quae confert longior aetas" (5, 66; many things which a longer age confers please me), and he points out that every age, even youth, has both its benefits and detractions, its abilities and disabilities. In short: "aetatum distinctas proprietates / Qui trahit in culpam, naturae ius reprehendit" (5, 86–87; he who draws the distinct properties of the ages into blame, censures the law of Nature). He declares:

Laudo senectutem quia turpes pellere motus
Noscitur et mundum servare libidine corpus;
Tum quod inest senibus rerum prudentia maior
Et quod tranquillam sectantur amantque quietem (5, 70–73)

[I praise old age because it is known to repel dishonorable impulses and to preserve the body clean from lust; what characterizes old men is greater judgment of things, and what they pursue and love is tranquil peace].

³⁰ See Cicero, *De senectute*, II.4: "quo in genere est in primis senectus; quam ut adipiscantur omnes optant, eandem accusant adeptam."

³¹ See Christine Ratkowitsch, "Der 'Liber decem capitulorum' des Marbod von Rennes: ein *simplex et unum* (Teil II)," *Mittelaltersches Jahrbuch* 35 (2000): 21–48; here 21: "Das fünfte Gedicht beginnt scheinbar als vituperatio senectutis (V. 1–65), die einerseits auf der drastischen Schilderung der Altersleiden durch Juvenal (10, 188–288) beruht . . . In der anschließenden *laudatio senectutis* (V. 66–126) sucht der Dichter deshalb eine solche 'falsche' Haltung zu korrigieren, zunächst mit Argumenten aus Ciceros 'Cato Maior,' dann, indem er diese in christliche umsetzt."

This is in fact a classical conceit that old age is able to free the mind from the vices of the body.³² Marbod also raises a point often repeated in the didactic literature of the Middle Ages, that a prime virtue of the old is their ability to offer advice (5, 76).³³ Moreover, Marbod declares, what are in fact failings of diligence and study should not be attributed simply to age, so that the forgetfulness habitually exhibited by the old should be considered rather “the failing of an unrefined mind,” not “a sin of failing age” (5, 90–91; “Hoc reor aetatis non culpa deficientis, / Sed magis incultae vitio contingere mentis”).³⁴ And he declares: “Unde patet non temporibus iuvenumve senumve / Stultitiae causam, sed moribus attribuendam” (5, 100–01; Wherefore it is clear that not to the periods of youth or of old age should the cause of stupidity be attributed, but to morals).³⁵ Marbod then adopts a particularly Ciceronian voice in praising the virtues of literary study which he thanks for preserving in him a healthy and mentally active temperament and for allowing him to fulfil now the proper function of his age and give sensible advice to those younger (5, 111–18).³⁶ In contrast to his earlier observation that old age is beset by declining sexuality, Marbod now professes the Ciceronian conceit that he is pleased about this rest from the demands of Nature (5, 119–22), and he attributes this gift to God the Creator. There is only a hint of an *ubi sunt* motif and of resigned acceptance in Marbod’s final lines in which he is happy to let youth have its pleasures while he enjoys his:

Delectet iuvenes latis discurrere campis,
Sectari lepores, capreas aviumque volatus,
Delectent epulae, ludi, spectacula, cantus;
Me meus oblectat meditantem talia lectus. (5, 123–26)

[Let it delight youths to run about on broad fields, to pursue hares, goats and the swift flights of birds, let banquets, games, shows, songs seduce them; my bed is comfort enough for me pondering upon such things.]

³² See for example Seneca Ep. XXVI.2: “Gratias tamen mihi apud te ago: non sentio in animo aetatis iniuriam, cum sentiam in corpore. Tantum vitia et vitiorum ministeria senuerunt: viget animus et gaudet non multum sibi esse cum corpore; magnam partem oneris sui posuit. Exultat et mihi facit controversiam de senectute: hunc ait esse florem suum.”

³³ See Cicero, *De senectute*, IX.29: “an ne tales quidem vires senectuti relinquimus, ut adulescentes doceat, instituat, ad omne officii munus instruat? quo quidem opere quid potest esse praeclarior?”

³⁴ This is a sentiment that will recur throughout the Middle Ages; see for example Petrarch, *De remediis utriusque fortune*, Bk 2, Ch. 83, “De senectute”: “sin vires etiam animi ut sepe accidit, per ignaviam decrevere, fateor inutiliter visixti, tuum crimen, non etatis.” Text cited from http://www.bibliotecaitaliana.it:6336/dynaweb/bibit/autori/p/petrarca/de_remediis (last accessed on Nov. 8, 2006).

³⁵ See Cicero, *De senectute*, III.8: “sed omnium istiusmodi querelarum in moribus est culpa, non in aetate”; and XVIII.65: “sed haec morum vitia sunt, non senectutis.”

³⁶ See Cicero, *De senectute*, VII.23: “Manent ingenia senibus, modo permaneat studium et industria.”

Can we draw from this meditation any sense of a true personal feeling about old age on behalf of the poet? Bond argues that Marbod shows a "great interest in portraying human nature with all its complications" and is "as concerned with reproducing emotions as with describing them."³⁷ He also describes the *Liber decem* as "autobiographical," although he cautions that it truly lies "between biography and typology."³⁸ Marbod himself gives some hint of personalization when he declares in the last line of his second chapter in the *Liber decem*: "Et mea scriptura confessio vivat in ista" (2, 211; And my confession lives on in this writing). This sense of leaving for posterity a record of one's thoughts and achievements is generally considered a mark of what is termed "late style," which typically informs works written or composed toward the end of the author's life: it is a marker of individuality that has often been thought to have postdated the Renaissance.

On a first reading, the individuality of Marbod's rumination on old age appears quite marked: when he begins by discussing the alleged discomforts and disabilities of old age, he speaks descriptively in the third person, but as soon as he turns to the more positive Ciceronian consideration of old age, the speaking "I" appears at once: "But many things which a longer age confers please *me*" (5, 66, my emphasis), he declares. This "I" then weaves in and out of the following observations on old age,³⁹ bringing with it the voice of experience: "senex memini . . ." (5, 104; As an old man I remember . . .); "Ast ego nunc suaves studiorum colligo fructus" (5, 111; But I now collect the sweet fruits of my studies). This "I" declares that his grey hairs can be read as a sign of the greater reverence he is now held in as a man of advanced age (5, 118; "Sed cani capitis crevit reverentia maior"), although we should note that this is one of only a few times that Marbod actually admits to experiencing personally any of the physical aspects of the aged body.

On a cautionary note, however, we must be aware, as Bond has theorized, that the new literary selves of the Loire Valley self-impersonation movement were designed to float ambiguously between "sincerity and deception, society and art,"⁴⁰ and a poetic characterization was the more successful the more authentic it appeared to be. The closing line of the chapter on old age, which seems to present a homely autobiographical reflection on the welcome respite of old age from vain

³⁷ *The Loving Subject*, 73.

³⁸ *The Loving Subject*, 97.

³⁹ See the note to 5, 117 by Leotta, *Marbodi Liber decem capitulorum*, 145: "**mihi**: l'ultima delle forme del pronome di 1a persona usate ripetutamente nei vv. 111-18 (*ego ~ mihi ~ mihi ~ me ~ mihi*), dove Marbodo contrappone la sua vegeta vecchiaia a quella flaccida di alcuni suoi coetanei, corrotti compangni di gioventù."

⁴⁰ *The Loving Subject*, 6.

pursuits, is drawn directly from Cicero.⁴¹ The pervasiveness of Maximianus's *Elegies* as a source for Marbod's reflections on old age⁴² should also give us pause, given that we have already seen how rhetorical these are.

There is also the issue of the Christian intentions in the *Liber*. Marbod makes it clear from the opening lines of the treatise, which resonate with Paul's words in *Corinthians*, that he is putting away childish things (specifically childish writings) in order to offer mature reflections: "Quae iuvenis scripsi, senior dum plura retracto, / Paenitet et quaedam vel scripta vel edita nollem" (1, 1–2; A great deal of what I wrote when I was young, I take back now I am older; I repent and I wish that I had not written or composed certain things.) He points out that the levity that is fitting to youths is hardly becoming to the old, whose words should savor rather of morality and whose stern brow should discourage vice (1, 47–50; "Praeterea iuvenem cantare iocosa decebat, / Quod manifesta seni ratio docet esse negatum / Cuius morali condiri verba sapore / Convenit et vitiis obsistere fronte severa"). This raises the possibility that Marbod's representations of old age could well be more doctrinal than experiential, prescriptive rather than descriptive. Further, it suggests that Marbod is here establishing himself as an example for others, a function of the text that would conflict somewhat with a genuine self-appraisal.⁴³ And given that similar themes flow through other chapters of the *Liber decem* which are not intimately connected with issues of old age, the possibility must be considered that Marbod uses the medium of old age to express a more general, even universal, moral message. At best we could say, then, that while this highly literary poem tantalizes us with the hint of a personal response to old age, it remains above all a rhetorical, philosophical, ethical response to the question of aging, penned by a man renowned both as a poet and a churchman.

Brian Stock has argued that "a significant turning point occurs between the late eleventh and early thirteenth centuries, when a group of Latin authors link the self, literary experience, and the emerging problem of intentions. In a number of twelfth-century authors, literary experience becomes the official intermediary between inner and outer expressions of selfhood."⁴⁴ Key among these texts are the early twelfth-century proto-autobiographies of Guibert of Nogent and Peter Abelard. As both these texts claim to present the author's life in narrative form,

⁴¹ Compare Cicero, *De senectute*, XI.38: "quae si exsequi nequirem, tamen me lectulus meus oblectaret, ea ipsa cogitantem quae iam agere non possem."

⁴² See Webster, *The Elegies of Maximianus*, 59; and Ratkowsitch, "Der 'Liber decem capitulorum' des Marbod von Rennes," 95–101; and "Der 'Liber decem capitulorum' des Marbod von Rennes . . . Teil II," 21–27.

⁴³ In her chapter in this volume, Sophie Bostock similarly discusses how elderly artists altered their self-portraits in pious preparation for death.

⁴⁴ "The Self and Literary Experience in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages," *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 839–52; here 849.

and both were written when the authors were in mature age, it will be instructive to discover what, if anything, these texts have to say about the process of aging and the onset of old age.

Guibert of Nogent's *Monodiae* (Solitary songs; also known as his *De vita sua*) is generally divided into three books, the first of which gives a wealth of autobiographical detail about his childhood and early life, the latter two of which concern monastic and political history. Yet although the *Monodiae* was completed in around 1115 when Guibert was about sixty (having been born in 1055),⁴⁵ his personal account ends without any real reference to the onset of old age. The text immediately stakes its claims for self-representation with the opening word "Confiteor" (I confess) which foregrounds the first-person speaking subject in a way that is not usual in Latin syntax.⁴⁶ Guibert then begins by making his confession to God, admitting both the sins of childhood and youth and the fact that they still beset him now in his "ripe" or "mature" age ("Confiteor pueritiae ac iuventutis meae mala, adhuc etiam in matura hac aetate aestuantia"); he adds that they have not ceased despite the sluggishness of his worn-out body ("necdum sub defatigati corporis torpore cessantia").⁴⁷ Yet this is the only reference Guibert makes at this point to his present advancing age, and his attention soon turns in far greater detail to the circumstances of his birth and early childhood.

Only many chapters later does Guibert return to the near present, to recount his election (at the age of about fifty) as abbot. Interestingly, Guibert does not depict himself at this age as being in or even nearing old age. He does compare his current "ripening age" with his boyhood ("quaedam, cum pene adhuc puerascerem, eis ostensa, quae mirabiliter aevo jam maturescente experior"),⁴⁸ but at the same time, he thanks God for having only recently freed him from a "childish" ambition ("intentio puerilis")⁴⁹ for worldly honors. Similarly, as he recounts, his mother bewailed his election because she feared the dangers he would face, being as yet at an age not fully knowledgeable ("periculum aetatis adhuc nesciae metuebat").⁵⁰ Whether this was truly how he saw his situation at the time, or whether, writing a decade later at the age of sixty, he viewed his fifty-year-old self in retrospect as barely mature, particularly in terms of the difficulties of his abbacy, we cannot know. Nevertheless, it is clear that this "first" medieval

⁴⁵ For these dates see Guibert de Nogent, *Autobiographie*, ed. and trans. (into French) Edmond-René Labande (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1981), ix and xvi.

⁴⁶ Although, as John F. Benton notes, it also indicates the importance of Augustine's *Confessions* as a model for the text, which conversely diminishes its sense of individuality: see *Self and Society in Medieval France* (1970; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 8.

⁴⁷ All citations from Labande, *Autobiographie*, here 2.

⁴⁸ Labande, *Autobiographie*, 158.

⁴⁹ Labande, *Autobiographie*, 164.

⁵⁰ Labande, *Autobiographie*, 166.

life narrative gives almost no sense of, and reveals no interest in, an individual's experience of old age.

We find the same curious lack of reference to old age in Peter Abelard's life narrative, the *Historia calamitatum* (Story of my misfortunes), written around 1132 when he was in his early fifties. Although this text is full of the ills that befell Abelard in the course of his life, never once is old age mentioned as one of these. Abelard bears witness to manifold misfortunes in his life brought about by divine will (he fell off his horse and broke his collarbone⁵¹) and by human failings—both his own (pride and lust) and those of others (envy and hatred)—but he never mentions Nature or the natural process of aging as one of the many evils besetting him. On the contrary, he describes himself at the time he met Heloise, at the age of about thirty-six, as being at the height of his youth (“Tanti quippe tunc nominis eram et iuventutis et forme gratia preminebam”).⁵² When Abelard notes early in his biography that his parents separated in order for each to enter the monastic life, he makes no mention of old age as a factor motivating their actions;⁵³ nevertheless, with Abelard, their eldest child, at that time in his mid-thirties, Berengar (a minor Breton nobleman) and Lucie must have been aged somewhere between fifty and sixty.⁵⁴ Indeed, the only mention of old age in this proto-autobiography is when Abelard repeatedly refers to one of his former teachers, Anselm of Laon, by the epithet “senex” (old man),⁵⁵ this apparently functioning as a shorthand way of signifying Anselm's tedious and outmoded teaching, and indicating that to Abelard, even writing at fifty, “old” was a description that applied more to others than to himself. Even Abelard's own death at the age of

⁵¹ “forte me die quadam de nostra lapsus equitatura manus Domini vehementer collisit, colli videlicet mei canalem confringens,” *La vie et les epistres Pierres Abaelart et Heloys sa fame: Traduction du XIII^e siècle attribuée à Jean de Meun. Avec une nouvelle édition des textes latin d'après le ms. Troyes Bibl. mun. 802*, ed. Eric Hicks (Paris and Geneva: Champion-Slatkine, 1991), 42, lines 1360–62; “one day the hand of the Lord struck me sharply and I fell from my saddle, breaking my collar-bone,” *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, trans. Betty Radice, rev. Michael T. Clanchy (London: Penguin, 2003), 41.

⁵² Hicks, *La vie et les epistres Pierres Abaelart et Heloys sa fame*, 10, lines 260–61; *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 10.

⁵³ “karissima michi mater mea Lucia repatriare me compulit; que videlicet post conversionem Berengarii patris mei ad professionem monasticam, idem facere disponebat,” Hicks, *La vie et les epistres Pierres Abaelart et Heloys sa fame*, 7, lines 133–35; “my dearest mother Lucie begged me to return home, for after my father Berengar's entry into monastic life she was preparing to do the same,” *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 6.

⁵⁴ See the chapter by Jonathan R. Lyon in this volume regarding old age as a factor in noble withdrawals into monastic communities.

⁵⁵ For example: “Accessi igitur ad hunc senem, cui magis longevus usus quam ingenium vel memoria nomen comparaverat,” Hicks, *La vie et les epistres Pierres Abaelart et Heloys sa fame*, 7, lines 141–43; “I therefore approached this old man, who owed his reputation more to long practice than to intelligence or memory,” *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 7. At this point, in 1113, Anselm would have been in his early sixties.

around sixty-three passes without explicit comment on his age: Peter the Venerable writes to Heloise detailing Abelard's last years of piety and obedience, and noting the various skin ailments and other illnesses to which he fell prey, but describes his passing without any reference to his specific age or to old age in general.⁵⁶ There is the possibility, however, that since Abelard's self-representation in the *Historia* is indebted to Maximianus's *Elegies* (and particularly first elegy), the entire autobiography could be read as an understated meditation on and acknowledgment of old age as an agent for change in Abelard's life.

Yet clues to Abelard's personal views on old age and approaching death appear more manifestly in the didactic poem he wrote for his son in the mid-1130s, known as the *Carmen ad Astralabium*.⁵⁷ This poem, which shows signs of having been influenced by Marbod's *Liber decem*, ranges widely across issues of social ethics, philosophy, and theology. Yet although it shares certain features of Marbod's approach to old age, it moves in a markedly different direction, and unlike Marbod, does not express the Ciceronian idea of the benefits of old age. This is surprising because elsewhere in the *Carmen* Abelard shows himself quite indebted to Ciceronian thought, with a long disquisition on friendship clearly drawn from Cicero's *De amicitia*. It is not that Abelard does not cite Cicero's *De senectute*—certainly his observations on approaching death are drawn explicitly from it—it is rather that his unrelentingly somber perspective on old age, his inability to find a redeeming feature to being old in this world, are un-Ciceronian.⁵⁸ Where Cicero, and even Seneca, were able to eulogize the special pleasures of life that accompany old age, even if these are simply the pleasures of no longer desiring pleasures,⁵⁹ Abelard takes a much more melancholy approach,

⁵⁶ Peter the Venerable, Letter 115 to Heloise, *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, 222.

⁵⁷ For a discussion of the experiential nature of Abelard's *Carmen*, see Juanita Feros Ruys, "Peter Abelard's *Carmen ad Astralabium* and Medieval Parent-Child Didactic Texts: The Evidence of Parent-Child Relationships in the Middle Ages," *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Results of a Paradigm Shift in the History of Mentality*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2005), 203–227.

⁵⁸ Abelard was not unique in the Middle Ages in this regard: around the turn of the thirteenth century Boncompagno da Segna penned a small treatise on old age for his bishop in Florence entitled *De malo senectutis et senii* ("On the evil of old age and decline") which took issue with Cicero declaring: "Scio tamen quod Marcus Tullius Cicero, qui fuit 'tuba Romani eloquii,' librum de bono senectutis aliquando pertractavit. Set ego non uideo quid boni uel utilitatis esse possit in graui senectute uel senio" (I know that Marcus Tullius Cicero, who was the 'trumpet of Roman eloquence,' at one time produced a book about the good of old age. But I do not see what of good or of usefulness there can be in heavy old age or decline): see *De malo senectutis et senii*, ed. Steven M. Wight, *Scrineum*, Università di Pavia, 1999, section [1.3]; here quoted from: <http://scrineum.unipv.it/wight/index.htm> (last accessed on Nov. 9, 2006).

⁵⁹ See for example Cicero, *De senectute*, XII.39: "o praeclarum munus aetatis, siquidem id aufert a nobis quod est in adulescentia vitiosissimum!" and XIII.43: "non modo vituperatio nulla sed etiam summa

focusing instead on the willed renunciation of pleasures in preparation for death, declaring: "Quo magis istius careo dulcedine uite, / Constat eo quia sit finis amara minus" (777–78;⁶⁰ By how much the more I abstain from the sweetness of this life, it is agreed that by so much will its end be the less bitter). Abelard takes here what could be described as a Christianized Senecan approach,⁶¹ looking forward only to death, actively embracing death in a Christian sense, which really means life everlasting:

Tempora sunt uite tanto breuiora future
 Quanto preterite longa fuere magis.
 Dum cupis ut mestis succedant tempora leta,
 Quo tua sit breuior uita futura cupis. (317–20)

[The remaining years of one's life are the shorter by as much as the past years of that life were long. Since you desire that happy times should succeed sorrowful ones, by this you desire that your remaining life should be the shorter.]

Yet there is also a strong hint here of Seneca's Stoic acceptance of suicide in the face of the irreversible decline of old age, and despite the fact that Abelard was a devout Christian, and indeed an abbot, there is a possible and peculiar reference to suicide in the *Carmen*.⁶²

laus senectutis est, quod ea voluptates nullas magnopere desiderat"; and Seneca, Ep. XII.5: "Quam dulce est cupiditates fatigasse ac reliquisse!"

⁶⁰ All citations taken from Juanita Ruys and John O. Ward, *The Repentant Abelard: Abelard's Thought as Revealed in the Carmen ad Astralabium and Planctus* (New York: Palgrave, forthcoming).

⁶¹ The twelfth century was the period in which Seneca's popularity as a moralist and philosopher grew markedly, and Abelard was one of the key figures both in adopting Seneca as an ethical authority and teaching from his Letters: see L. D. Reynolds, *The Medieval Tradition of Seneca's Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), Ch. 9: "The Letters in the Literature of the Twelfth Century," 112–24.

⁶² Abelard contemplated the question of suicide in a number of other works as well: he deals with the personal and poetic aspects of Samson's suicide in his *Planctus* (Lament) IV ("Planctus Israel super Sanson"), and with the theological issue of suicide in Quaestio CLV of his dialectical *Sic et non* (Yes and No) which asks: "Quod liceat homini inferre sibi manus aliquibus de causis et contra" (Whether it may be lawful for a man to bear hands against himself for any reason, or not). On twelfth-century antagonism to Seneca's advocacy of suicide see Reynolds, *The Medieval Tradition*, 116; and Alexander Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages*, 2 vols, Vol. 1: *The Violent against Themselves* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 38; Murray here describes the question of suicide as "pivotal" in the "dialectic between Christian and Stoic moral systems." "In Walter of St Victor's twelfth-century treatise *Contra quatuor labyrinthos Franciae*, Seneca's advocacy of suicide is listed as a "mortifera doctrina" (deadly teaching), while Abelard is listed as one of the four "labyrinths" (or evil snares) of France; see P. Glorieux, "Le *Contra quatuor labyrinthos Franciae* de Gauthier de Saint-Victor: Édition critique," *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du moyen âge* 27 (1952): 187–335; here 197, 201. For a discussion of suicide in late-medieval literary texts, see Albrecht Classen, "Desperate Lovers, Suicidal and Murderous: Early Modern Dawn Songs and Ballads," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 100.2 (1999): 207–26.

Liberat a pena miserum qui interficit ipsum,
 Si pena penitus uita futura uacat.
 Est igitur pietas misere non parcere uite
 Si post hanc uitam nulla sequatur eam. (561–64)

[He who kills a wretch liberates him from torment, if the life to come is wholly free of torment. And so it is a duty not to spare a wretched life if, after this life, no other follows.]

However, where Seneca could write with equanimity that he feared neither possibility of death—either ceasing to exist or undergoing a change of form⁶³—Abelard inhabits the medieval Christian world of darker eternal possibilities.⁶⁴ For him the greatest value of old age is the interval it allows for proper preparation for death, and, continuing his *memento mori* theme, he warns his son:

In quam dum moreris regionem cogeris ire
 Mens tua dum uiuis cogitet assidue:
 Quis status illius, qualis sit mancio uite
 Cui tam difficilem mors parat introitum. (689–92)

[Into what region you will be forced to go when you die let your mind consider assiduously while you are alive: what kind of dwelling there may be for your next life, what its standing might be, to which death prepares so difficult an entrance.]

Throughout the poem Abelard's statements on old age veer between the traditional and the original. For instance, he declares: "Omnes ad senium cupimus producere uitam, / Cum pigeat dici quemque uel esse senem" (311–12; We all wish to prolong our life into old age, even though it is distasteful to every man either to be, or to be called, an old man) which was a staple of texts on old age in the Middle Ages.⁶⁵ Similarly he argues: "Ad senium nemo est qui non pertingere querat, / Cum labor in senio penaque maxima sit" (321–22; There is no-one who would not seek to attain old age, even though toil and affliction are greatest in old

⁶³ Ep. LXV.24: "Mors quid est? aut finis aut transitus. Nec desinere timeo . . . nec transire." See similarly Cicero, *De senectute*, XIX.66: "quae aut plane neglegenda est si omnino exstinguit animum, aut etiam optanda si aliquo eum deducit ubi sit futurus aeternus; atqui tertium certe nihil inveniri potest"; and XX.73: "post mortem quidem sensus aut optandus aut nullus est."

⁶⁴ Seneca does allude to the torments that mythological figures suffer in the Underworld in his Ep. XXIV.18, but dismisses these as childish fears: "Mors nos aut consumit aut exuit; emissis meliora restant onere detracto, consumptis nihil restat, bona pariter malaque summota sunt."

⁶⁵ See Marbod, cited above, and Petrarch, *De remediis utriusque fortune*, Bk 2, Ch. 83, "De senectute": "senes fieri volunt omnes, senex esse vult nemo." See also Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 55: "Bernardino of Siena . . . expatiated on the inconsistency of human conduct: everyone wants to reach old age, but no one wants to be old. A man desires, strives and hopes to live as long as possible, but having grown old he complains."

age), which again can be found elsewhere.⁶⁶ His declaration that nothing is so devoid of modesty as an old woman (190; “Hocque carere bono nil ita sicut anus”) is an unconsidered piece of traditional antifeminism. About the positive aspects of old age Abelard has little to say beyond the medieval commonplace that the value of the old lies in their ability to offer advice. Thus he advises his son to bear patiently the reproof of an older person and to give thanks for it as though after great gifts (269–70; “Cum te coripiat senior pacienter habeto / Et grates tanquam post data magna refer”); similarly he declares that while it is the place of young men to wage wars, it is for their elders to direct them through counsel (351–52; “Bella gerant iuuenes, seniores consilientur; / Hos quid agant illi constituisse decet”).

Yet there are moments of originality in Abelard’s response to old age. Like Marbod, Abelard is scathing about the miserly old, deriding the greed of those who hold on to all their money until they are dead (621–26); yet unlike other medieval moralists, he makes his point with a mordantly satirical portrait of a deceased miser hurrying to the Shades below, but even begrudging Charon, the ferryman, his coin (411–14). Most striking is Abelard’s permutation of a traditional opinion on old age drawn from both Cicero and Seneca. Abelard begins with the standard observation: “Nemo senex adeo, quin uiuere posse per annum / Se confidat adhuc; . . . ” (313–14; No-one is so old but that he still trusts that he can live for another year; . . .). When Cicero makes this same statement,⁶⁷ he uses it to show the selfless activity of the old, who will continue to till lands and plant crops that they know they will not live to enjoy, working for the benefit of others. Seneca, making the same point about the inevitability of death, puts a positive spin on it, adding that one more day is at least another step on life’s journey.⁶⁸ But for Abelard, when he continues this line, there is no positive aspect to the deluded human belief that one can simply keep going. The full passage in Abelard’s poem thus gives a much bleaker outlook than his sources:⁶⁹

Nemo senex adeo, quin uiuere posse per annum
Se confidat adhuc; fallitur omnis in hoc:

⁶⁶ See, for example, Petrarch, *De remediis utriusque fortune*, Bk 2, Ch. 83, “De senectute”: “Vivere optabas, et vixisse te penitet” (you desired to live and yet you are sorry that you have lived).

⁶⁷ See *De senectute*, VII.24: “nemo est enim tam senex qui se annum non putet posse vivere — sed idem in eis elaborant quae sciunt nihil ad se omnino pertinere.”

⁶⁸ See Ep. XII.6: “deinde nemo tam senex est ut inprobe unum diem speret. Unus autem dies gradus vitae est.”

⁶⁹ Note however the contiguity of Abelard’s thought with one of the distichs from the traditional collection of late antique sententiae known as the *Disticha Catonis* (a common source for Abelard’s *Carmen*), IV.37: “Tempora longa tibi noli promittere vitae; / Quocumque ingrederis sequitur mors corporis umbra” (Do not promise yourself long years of life; wheresoever you go, death, the body’s shadow, follows).

Nullus enim est aliquo qui non moriatur in anno
 Quem tamen et uite deputat ipse sue. (313–16)

[No-one is so old but that he still trusts that he can live for another year; everyone is deceived in this: for there is no-one who does not die in some year or other, even though he himself had counted that year to his life.]

Can we see in these meditations on old age any sign of a personal view of old age? At the time he wrote these reflections, Abelard would have been in his mid-fifties, and, as his *Historia* makes clear, had suffered a great number of adversities in his life—castration, a condemnation for heresy, relentless pursuit by his enemies, and a resounding failure to reform his monastery—which may well have left him feeling his years. We must recall that Abelard is always a highly literary writer, drawing from classical, Biblical and patristic sources in a thoroughly rhetorical way. Nevertheless, in the case of his attitude to old age as expressed in his *Carmen* we do perhaps catch a glimpse of real sentiment. In a writer always so conscious of his literary antecedents, for Abelard here to refuse to follow, and even to revise, the standard classical sources on old age such as Cicero and Seneca, might indicate a genuinely individual response to the problem of aging. The deep melancholy associated with age in the *Carmen* could well reflect Abelard's own state of mind as he drew near the end of his troubled life. Like Marbod, Abelard shows evidence of late style in his *Carmen*, devoting a number of lines to the possibility of living on after death through one's writings (947–60). With some caution, then, we can suggest that here a glimpse of a medieval autobiographical, experiential response to old age can be found.

A quick word should be said about Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) at this point since he is a key late-medieval self-referential writer, although his approach to old age has already been discussed to some extent by James D. Folts, Jr, Shulamith Shahar, J. A. Burrow, and others.⁷⁰ Petrarch wrote an examination of his inner self in the form of a dialogue between himself ("Francesco") and St Augustine, a text which is known as the *Secretum*.⁷¹ Perhaps the key aspect of Petrarch's evocation of old age in this proto-humanistic text is the way it illustrates a philosophical

⁷⁰ See James D. Folts, Jr, "Senescence and Renaissance: Petrarch's Thoughts on Growing Old," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 10 (1980): 207–37; Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 19–20; and J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 142, 156, 181–82.

⁷¹ The *Secretum* is "set in 1342–3 . . . but actually written . . . in 1347, 1349, and 1353, with marginal notes added in 1358"; see Albert Rabil, Jr, "Petrarch, Augustine, and the Classical Christian Tradition," *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, 3 vols, Vol. 1: Humanism in Italy, ed. Albert Rabil, Jr (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 95–114; here 102. This revision over an extended period of time calls into question any sense of the immediately personal nature of the text, rendering its rhetorical construction the more evident

continuum from the high Middle Ages to the dawn of the early modern era. Thus, in common with Boethius, Marbod and (as we shall see) Erasmus, Petrarch's argument in the *Secretum*, spoken in the voice of Augustine, is the need to read the emerging physical signs of old age as a call to turn from worldly things—human loves and secular classical writings—to the things and texts that will bring spiritual benefit. Augustine asks Francesco if he has looked in the mirror lately and noticed that his face is changing and that his temples are beginning to gleam with white hairs (3.11.5; “Vidisti ne te nuper in speculo? . . . nonne vultum tuum variari in dies singulos et intermicantes temporibus canos animadvertisti?”)⁷² When Francesco tries to brush off the signs of his advancing age as natural and of no special meaning, given that men can begin to go grey from a very early age, Augustine responds: “Laudo quicquid id est, propter quod nec adventantem metuas senectutem, nec presentem oderis; quicquid vero non esse senectutem huius lucis exitum suggerit nec de morte cogitandum, summopere detestor atque execror” (3.11.11; I praise anything that allows you not to fear advancing old age, nor to hate it once it has arrived; but anything that suggests that old age is not the point of exit from this life and that death need not be considered, I loath and detest with all my heart). Augustine then advises Francesco to accept the signs of oncoming age and to take action, putting away childish things and preparing his soul for its more important journey.

Throughout this discussion the figure of Francesco appears entirely and appealingly human: living in hopeful denial of his age, failing to understand Augustine's arguments, coming up with optimistic counterexamples to them drawn from his classical reading, remaining boyishly fixed on his love for Laura, and finding any excuse not to turn from the world and consider matters of more everlasting significance. In these lines of dialogue we find a psychological divide being depicted between the physical signs of Petrarch's age and his own feelings about that age. As we have seen earlier, this is a divide that hints at a moment when a genuine authorial personality can break through a rhetorically structured text, yet interestingly enough, the voice of Augustine immediately interposes both to deny and to collapse this distinction by insisting that Francesco face his age and impending mortality: “Causaris non servatis nature gradibus ante diem festinasse . . . Et tu, michi crede: non adeo, ut tibi videris forsitan, puer es. Maior pars hominum hanc, quam tu nunc degis, etatem non attingit” (3.12.4–5; You argue that, not having observed the proper steps of Nature, it [old age] has hurried upon you before its time . . . But, believe me, you are not still the boy you seem to think you are. The greater part of humanity does not attain this age to which you have

⁷² All citations from Francesco Petrarca, *Secretum*, ed. and trans. (into Italian) Ugo Dotti (Rome: Archivio Guido Izzi, 1993).

now lived).⁷³ At every turn, then, the verisimilitude of Petrarch's self-representation is undercut by the immediate moral-didactic counterpoint of Augustine who is not just a construction of Petrarch's pen, but, as Nicholas Mann has stated, Petrarch's "alter ego," Petrarch "as he felt he ought to be."⁷⁴

Moreover, Francesco's apparently human "misunderstandings" are wilfully and playfully rhetoric: thus we find Francesco misquoting a line uttered by Cato in Cicero's *De senectute*, on the immortality of the soul, as though it could provide a defence of his love for Laura—an attempt that Augustine quickly counters.⁷⁵ Furthermore, since Augustine believed that "the fundamental spiritual movement" was one from "speech to silence,"⁷⁶ Francesco's continual and all-too-human ripostes to Augustine's didactic warnings are designed precisely to indicate that Petrarch is in need of the moral advice he is receiving: the dialogue will have achieved its aim when it is no longer a dialogue, but a monologue. Petrarch's replies are therefore not intended to express an autobiographical experience of old age, but are a literary fiction designed to make a moral point.

That Petrarch was thoroughly familiar with all the classical philosophical and medieval theological arguments for and against old age is evident in his *De remediis utriusque fortune* (On the answers to both good and bad fortune) which, like the *Secretum*, is written in a dialogue form. In this case, however, the dialogues are staged between allegorical speakers. In Book I, Chapter 1, "De etate florida et spe vite longioris" (On youth and the hope of a long life), Ratio (Reason) must combat the youthful exuberance of Gaudium and Spes (Joy and Hope, speaking as one) who argue that youth is the best time of life, reminding them that the only exit from youth other than death is old age, and advising them to think on matters of greater permanence. On the other hand, in Book II, Chapter 83, "De senectute"

⁷³ There is also an interesting criticism made here by Augustine of the various "ages of man" schemas: "angustissimam etatem alii in quattuor, alii in sex particulas, alii in plures etiam distribuunt; ita rem minimam, quia quantitate non licet, numero tentatis extendere" (3.12.1; some divide our most limited lifetime into four parts, others into six, and others into still more; thus you attempt to stretch out a very small thing in numbers, since you cannot increase its overall size).

⁷⁴ Nicholas Mann, *Petrarch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 14.

⁷⁵ F: "Perdis operam; nulli crediturus sum; succurritque tullianum illud: 'Si in hoc erro, libenter erro, neque hunc errorem auferri michi volo, dum vivo'" / A: "Ille quidem de anime immortalitate loquens opinionem pulcerrimam omnium ac volens quam nihil in ea dubitaret quamque contrarium audire nollet ostendere, huiusmodi verbis usus est; tu in opinione fedissima atque falsissima iisdem verbis abuteris" (3.2.7; F: Your efforts are in vain; I will not believe anyone; and that Ciceronian comment springs to mind: "If I err in this, I err willingly, and nor do I want this error seized from me while I live." A: In fact, he used these words speaking about the immortality of the soul and wanting to show that that most beautiful of all opinions can in no way be doubted and that he did not want to hear anything against it; you abuse these same words in the service of a most filthy and most false opinion).

⁷⁶ See Seth Lerer, *Boethius and Dialogue: Literary Method in The Consolation of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 94.

(On old age), a text deeply indebted to Cicero's *De senectute*,⁷⁷ Reason advises Dolor (Sadness) to avoid despair in old age and accept both the life that was lived and the death that must come. Petrarch's facility in the *De remediis* in producing arguments both for and against old age, and the individualized voices that express them,⁷⁸ underline his consummate rhetorical skill and therefore bring into question any sense of the personal experience of old age in his *Secretum*. We can acknowledge that while the *De remediis* is an entirely impersonal text, in the *Secretum* Petrarch applies his knowledge of the discursive history of the theme of old age to an individual life, constructing the human face of a man approaching old age and facing a crossroads in his life.

There is no doubt, as Folts argues, that Petrarch's Letters of Old Age (*Seniles*) constitute a further significant source for his feelings on old age, although again these letters are rhetorically constructed, revised over a number of years, and occasionally fictional.⁷⁹ We find here frequent references to old age, many of these more personalized versions of arguments made by Reason in the *De remediis*, many clearly indebted to Cicero and Seneca. An interesting moment arises when Petrarch argues for a distinction between his own personal experience of aging and the authoritative pronouncements on the divisions of ages made by writers like Cicero and Augustine.⁸⁰ On the whole, however, he writes explicitly to affirm Cicero's cause in the *De senectute*. As Mann advises, "[g]iven so much evidence of Petrarch's self-awareness, but also of his self-concealment, it is hardly fruitful to attempt to separate some notional kernel of fact from the ubiquitous shell of fiction."⁸¹

For a truly elegiac approach to old age, and one that recalls the nostalgic spirit of a Tibullus or Ovid, however, we need to enter the dawn of Latin humanism and consider the celebrated poem of Desiderius Erasmus known alternatively as the "Carmen de senectute" or the "Carmen Alpestre," after the Alps through which Erasmus was traveling in 1506 when he wrote it. Perhaps in some repudiation of

⁷⁷ On the relationship between Petrarch and Cicero in general, see Maristella Lorch, "Petrarch, Cicero, and the Classical Pagan Tradition," *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, Vol. 1: Humanism in Italy, 71-94.

⁷⁸ On this see Folts, "Senescence and Renaissance," 237: "the modern reader . . . is impressed by the equally relentless power, if not the eloquence, of the human emotions of hope and fear, joy and sorrow, and of sex, which are given voice in the work."

⁷⁹ See Francis Petrarch, *Letters of Old Age: Rerum senilium libri I-XVIII*, 2 vols, trans. Aldo S. Bernardo, Saul Levin, and Reta A. Bernardo (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), "Introduction," Vol. I, xvii-xxi; here xviii.

⁸⁰ Letter VIII.1 to Giovanni Boccaccio, *Letters of Old Age*, Vol. I, 265 where Petrarch says to himself: "Wait, then, until you can resolve the matter according to your own judgment and experience, not that of the writers, especially when they disagree. When you feel that you are old, then and no sooner will you declare your old age."

⁸¹ Mann, *Petrarch*, 100.

the increasingly ubiquitous medical literature that offered hope of delaying or mitigating the signs of old age, Erasmus dedicates his poem to one of the most renowned physicians of his time, William Cop, who had in fact treated him earlier in his life, and he begins by praising Cop's skills as a physician, claiming: "Cedit fugitque morbi / Ingenio genus omne tuo" (6–7; Every kind of ailment departs and flees from your skill).⁸² But then he raises the issue of old age, which he calls "Teterrima . . . Senecta, morbus ingens" (7–8; most hideous old age, monstrous illness), and which he claims is beyond the cure of any mortal physician.⁸³ This illness works like a cancer through the body, taking with it form, stature, complexion, memory, sight, sleep, strength, and liveliness (16–18). Erasmus pictures it sucking the human body dry until nothing is left of the person but a name and title carved in marble on a tomb, and he asks: "Utrum haec senecta, quaeso, / An mors lenta magis dicenda est?" (28–29; Should this be called old age, I ask, or rather slow death?). He adduces the long-lived creatures of the world (traditionally, the deer and the crow) and compares with them the brevity of human life: bodily strength begins to depart after the thirty-fifth year he claims (43–45), and by fifty, the mind as well as the body is under attack (47–50).

Erasmus then immediately personalizes his lament declaiming: "Quam nuper hunc Erasmus / Vidisti media viridem florere iuventa!" (56–57; How recently you saw this lively Erasmus flourishing at the height of his youth!), and declares that he begins to feel the pressing inconveniences of old age (58–59, "urgentis senii damna") now that he is almost forty years old (!; 61–64). This confession has been taken by earlier scholars as an indication of which years were assigned to the various ages of man in the Renaissance,⁸⁴ but most recent commentators on Erasmus's poem feel that this sense of impending old age at thirty-nine is rather a function of a deep melancholy he was experiencing at this time. We must also bear in mind Shahar's advice that writers' statements of having attained old age at forty—which are by no means confined to medieval writers—do not necessarily present an insight into cultural schemas of aging as much as they reveal a particular psychological moment in writers' lives when they feel best by illness or other pressures.⁸⁵ Joel T. Rosenthal also reminds us that "literary conventions

⁸² All citations from *Collected Works of Erasmus: Poems* (Vol. 85), ed. Harry Vredeveld, trans. Clarence H. Miller (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 12–25, Poem 2; see also *The Poems of Desiderius Erasmus*, ed. C. Reedijk (Leiden: Brill, 1956), 283–90.

⁸³ The implications of this description of old age as an illness for early modern medical theory and practice are discussed by Daniel Schäfer, "Medical Representations of Old Age in the Renaissance: The Influence of Non-Medical Texts," *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe*, 11–19.

⁸⁴ See Creighton Gilbert, "When Did a Man in the Renaissance Grow Old?," *Studies in the Renaissance* 14 (1967): 7–32; here 11–12.

⁸⁵ *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 19–24. See also the Introduction to this volume by Albrecht Classen. Consider in this regard as well George Gascoigne's aged poetic persona as discussed by Kevin P.

about the length of life and the onset of age weighed more in self-expression than did autobiographical experience."⁸⁶ Nevertheless, Erasmus backs up his claim to old age with a catalogue of unmistakable signs: his temples are sprinkled with straggling grey hairs, and his beard has begun to turn white (65–67: "Nunc mihi iam raris sparguntur tempora canis, / Et albicare mentum / Incipiens . . ."), and he lets fly a string of poetic laments drawn from Virgil and Horace over his lost youth, comparing its winged flight with billowing clouds and fleeting rivers.

Next he laments the waste he has made of his life, and he shows us first-hand the humanist education he received: as a youth he was consumed in studying letters, the battles of the sophists, the *colores* of rhetoric, *figurae* of poetry, Classical authors, Greek and Latin tongues (90–103); yet while he was carefree and absorbed in these studies, old age stole upon him and snatched away his youth (110–11; "Furtim inter ista pigrum / Obrepsit senium, et subito segnescere vireis").⁸⁷ He laments that humans put such care into preserving gold and jewels, while allowing something as precious as age to slip away in vain (115–22). As if to display the value of his learning, he launches into a long disquisition on how youth can never be regained, made dense almost to the point of impenetrability by its interwoven learned allusions to Greek and Roman mythology. Finally he rouses himself from this reverie crying:

Satis hactenus, miselle,
Cessatum, satis est dormitum! Pellere somnos
Nunc tempus est, Erasme,
Nunc expergisci et tota respiscere mente. (186–89)

[Enough time has spent thus far in delay, you wretch, enough in sleep, now is the time, Erasmus, to banish your slumbers, now you must awaken and come to yourself again with a whole mind.]

Now is the time, he continues, when grey hairs are only recently arrived and still sparse enough to be counted (197–99), while the mind is undamaged and the body has only just come under attack (211–13), to turn his attention to what really matters. We see here an interesting use of "ages of man" imagery, with Erasmus declaring that these initial signs of greying indicate that he is leaving the period of "flourishing youth" ("virentis iuventae"), and remind him of the looming presence of "barren old age" ("sterilem senectam"), although this has not yet

Laam, "Aging the Lover: The *Posies* of George Gascoigne", *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe*, 75–91; here 76: "Gascoigne never met with old age himself, dying around age forty, but he imported its fictions into his poetic persona so ably as to suggest the potential yet to be tapped—or more specifically troped—from this otherwise crudely wrought adversary."

⁸⁶ Joel T. Rosenthal, "Retirement and the Life Cycle in Fifteenth-Century England," *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, 173–88; here 186.

⁸⁷ Note the reference to Cicero, *De senectute*, II.4: "obrepere aiunt eam citius quam putavissent."

arrived: he stands but yet "on the doorstep of miserable old age" ("tristis . . . in limine . . . senectae").

In a clever linking of pagan with Christian imagery Erasmus then declares that he must devote whatever time the Fates have left to him to Christ alone (215–16; "Fata aevi superesse volent, id protinus omne / CHRISTO dicetur uni"). He thus farewells syllogisms, rhetoric, and the Muses in order to be free for Christ (225–30). This last section of the poem therefore offers the reader a Christianized version of Cicero's *De senectute*, but instead of concentrating on the sorts of literary, rhetorical, and philosophical studies that Cicero recommends for the declining years, these are precisely the works that Erasmus now resolves to put away, freeing himself instead for a specifically Christian, and no longer humanist, contemplation of his soul.

Scholars have long been divided over the apparently strong personal voice adopted by Erasmus in this poem. A mid-twentieth-century editor of Erasmus's poetry, Cornelius Reedijk, declared that the poem is "remarkable for its personal tone," arguing that in it "the poet's feelings are reflected with unusual directness."⁸⁸ Another commentator on the poem has noted its "personal feeling and its largely autobiographical intention."⁸⁹ More recently, however, such attitudes have been regarded as wishful thinking, typical of a post-Romantic reading of poetry. Rather, scholars such as Harry Vredeveld now advise that we should see this poem not as "a psychological document, the confession of a soul laid bare," but as a typical product of the humanist literary-rhetorical tradition, in this case, "a Christian inversion of the *carpe-diem* poem."⁹⁰ There is no doubt that the strongly nostalgic, elegiac tone encourages the reader to perceive personal elements in the poem, but these are, on closer inspection, even less marked than in certain classical Latin exemplars: in fact, Erasmus barely speaks in the first person at all. He opens with a long descriptive introduction on the theme of time's passing, and when he comes to treat his own experience, he continues to talk about

⁸⁸ *The Poems of Desiderius Erasmus*, 281.

⁸⁹ D. F. S. Thomson, "Erasmus as a Poet in the Context of Northern Humanism," *Commémoration Nationale d'Érasme. Actes: Bruxelles, Gand, Liège, Anvers: 3–6 juin 1969 / Nationale Erasmus-Herdenking. Handelingen: Brussel, Gent, Luik, Antwerpen: 3–6 juni 1969* (Brussels: Bibliothèque Royale / Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 1970), 187–210; here 210. See also Jean-Claude Margolin, "Le 'Chant Alpestre' d'Érasme: poème sur la vieillesse," *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance* 27 (1965): 37–79; here 74: "Les poèmes sur la vieillesse, ses inconvénients ou ses avantages, sont innombrables, dans toutes les littératures du monde. Certains, comme le poème d'Érasme, ont un accent sincère; d'autres ne sont qu'une accumulation de lieux communs." Margolin argues that a letter written by Erasmus contemporary with the composition of this poem, and very similar to it in themes and language, indicates that the poem must be a true reflection of Erasmus's state of mind (47).

⁹⁰ See Harry Vredeveld, "Two Philological Puzzles in Erasmus' 'Poem on Old Age,'" *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance* 49 (1987): 597–604; here 597–98; and *Collected Works of Erasmus: Poems* (Vol. 86: Notes to Poems), 412–14.

himself in the third person: "How recently you saw this lively Erasmus" (56) he tells his readers, while towards the end of the poem he addresses himself in the second person: "now is the time, Erasmus, to banish your slumbers" (188). While the second-person address to the self can create an illusion of personal introspection, Petrarch's *Secretum* indicates that it may function rhetorically as well.⁹¹ Rarely, in a poem of over two hundred lines, do we hear Erasmus describe his own feelings on old age in a first-person voice.

Some of Erasmus's earlier poems, written when he was only in his early twenties, offer important comparisons here. An elegy on grief ("Elegia querela doloris"), written when Erasmus was about twenty-one, opens with precisely the same catalogue of the ills of old age—and more—that we find in his more mature "Carmen de senectute." Here Erasmus laments that care and sorrow have so beset him, they are bringing with them grey hairs ahead of their time ("Iam quae canicie spergant mea tempora tristi / Praevenere diem cura dolorque suum").⁹² Should we read this poem, too, as autobiographical? The answer would appear to be in the negative, when we consider how indebted this brief twelve-line elegy is to previous poetic meditations on old age. For instance, Erasmus here declares that "Pendeat arenti corpore laxa cutis" (12; the loose skin hangs from my withered body), a clear reminiscence of the opening lines of Boethius's *Consolation*, quoted and discussed above. Similarly, Erasmus's statement that "Iamque senem esse volunt nec senuisse sinunt" (10; And now he [God] wants me to be an old man, but he does not allow me to grow old), is inspired by the opening lines of Maximianus's first elegy, also discussed above.

Around two years later Erasmus penned another elegy on the same theme ("Elegia de mutabilitate temporum"),⁹³ addressed to a friend, which uses classical imagery to depict the passing of time in Nature. Erasmus advises his friend that youth similarly hastens away and "hump-backed old age" ("curva senecta") steals in, and he lists the physical changes that will attack his friend's youth and beauty. The answer, he advises, is to use youth while it is present. Again, one or two years later (while still in his early twenties) Erasmus returned to this theme, in an elegy against a young man who was wasting his youth, with a warning about impending death.⁹⁴ As before, Erasmus enjoins his addressee to learn from Nature how swiftly time passes, and he draws another compelling image of the physical reign of old age upon the body (grey hair, loose skin, pale face, wrinkles, fading eyesight), concluding that in the end, the old person becomes unrecognizable to himself and even unlike himself (68: "Ignotusque tibi dissimilisque tui").

⁹¹ See Folts, "Senescence and Renascence," 221.

⁹² *Collected Works of Erasmus: Poems*, Vol. 85, 234, Poem 101.

⁹³ *Collected Works of Erasmus: Poems*, Vol. 85, 248–50, Poem 104.

⁹⁴ *Collected Works of Erasmus: Poems*, Vol. 85, 208–14, Poem 95.

Vredevelde suggests that this elegy is very like the “*Carmen de senectute*,” except that in the later poem Erasmus used himself rather than an unnamed addressee “as the chief exemplum of the flight of youth.”⁹⁵

Such a personalization for didactic purposes is clearly not, however, to be equated with autobiography. These three elegies, with their repetition of the images and vocabulary of old age, indicate that even from youth, Erasmus was familiar and practiced with composing Latin meditations upon old age.⁹⁶

We need also to place Erasmus’s “*Carmen de senectute*” in its historical humanist moment. Nina Taunton has argued that images of old age at the dawn of humanism “were complex, and therefore confusing” due to both “the humanist impulse towards the text . . . the rhetorical nature of experience, and, contradictorily, newly emerging ways of arriving at knowledge of the world direct, unmediated by the written word.”⁹⁷ As a way of navigating between these poles, Taunton argues that Cicero’s *De senectute* offered a guide.⁹⁸ We find enacted in Erasmus’s “*Carmen de senectute*” precisely this tension, with Cicero’s treatise set at the heart of Erasmus’s poem, interpreted via poetry that simultaneously strives towards a recreation of classical literariness and an impression of immediate experience. Clearly, then, we must exercise caution when attempting to draw genuine personal feelings from the poetry, so deeply indebted to a range of classical authors and motifs, of a brilliant humanist author. Erasmus’s aim in his poems on old age would appear to be less to anatomize his personal feelings, and more to create learned Christian didactic that would remind his readers to grasp life now and dedicate it to Christ rather than to the vain pursuits that time and death can obliterate in an instant.

This excursion through first-person Latin meditations on old age in the Middle Ages therefore reveals texts of consummate skill, literary artistry, rhetorical virtuosity, learned intertextuality, and devout Christian purpose; what it does not clearly find, however, is evidence of truly autobiographical feelings on old age. Here and there we catch glimpses of what might constitute a personal experience of aging, but always in texts that are so rhetorically constructed, and written with such clear moral-didactic intentions, that one can claim the personal aspects as authentic only cautiously. Moreover, in texts that can generically be defined as

⁹⁵ *Collected Works of Erasmus: Poems*, Vol. 86, 589.

⁹⁶ Consider also the discussion by Anouk Janssen in her contribution to this volume of Erasmus’s treatment of old age in his highly moralistic *Praise of Folly*.

⁹⁷ Nina Taunton, “Time’s Whirligig: Images of Old Age in *Coriolanus*, Francis Bacon and Thomas Newton,” *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe*, 21–38; here 21.

⁹⁸ Taunton, “Time’s Whirligig,” 22.

"autobiography" (or at least, proto-autobiography), old age seems to play little part in authorial descriptions of the self.

Perhaps it is too much to expect literary individuality in a literature that remained as a whole so thoroughly indebted to classical models; perhaps, indeed, we will never be able to identify the "personal" as such, when even what was experienced as personal was still expressed in terms inherited from the classical tradition. It may even be that we need to revise our expectations of what "the personal" would look like in such texts, identifying it not in terms of bold statements of striking originality, but finding it nuanced in the slightest of details, such as the reworking of a traditional observation or its placement in a new context.⁹⁹ It is clear, however, that many of the texts discussed here, and particularly the poetic ones, were written at a time of crisis or late in the author's life, when he was in the process of evaluating the life he had already led and contemplating his preparations for the one to come. The allusions in these texts to leaving a legacy of the self for coming generations also hint at what would subsequently come to be called "late style." It is these considerations that allow us to perceive, however faintly, in these writings genuine fears, beliefs, and concerns about the process of aging in the Middle Ages.

⁹⁹ Consider in this regard Lynne Dickson Bruckner's study of Ben Jonson's elegy on the death of first-born son and her comments that "[s]keptics may argue that Jonson's use of convention and a source poem (drawn from Martial) diminishes the probability that the elegy is expressive of felt emotion. Jonson, however, was known to express some of his most personal sentiments through the mouthpiece of classical phrases and quotes. And it is equally useful to recall that in the early modern period convention was far from antithetical to sincerity;" see "Ben Jonson's Branded Thumb and the Imprint of Textual Paternity," *Printing and Parenting in Early Modern England*, ed. Douglas A. Brooks (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 109–30; here 112.

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Old Age in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and *Titurel*

The Middle Ages held an ambivalent view of old age. On the one hand, old age was associated with wisdom, especially for the long living and well to do; at the same time a negative attitude toward old age prevailed.¹ For the elderly, ailments were often understood as punishment for an overindulgent life lived to the fullest in younger years. The sins of the youth come back to haunt the aged, and longevity is then only to be feared.² Medieval allegories express a similar dichotomy with the personification of the world as often beautiful on the surface, but black and rotten inside, or with a deceivingly beautiful front and an ugly hidden back.³ Walther von der Vogelweide's so-called *Alterslieder* are a reflection of such a dialectical understanding of the world. But historically, old age has also been seen as a stage of ultimate wisdom based on the vast amount of experience one attains from having lived a long life. According to this view, the old and wise does not reject the here and now, but is full of knowledge from a past long gone by and may give advice to others for the future.⁴ Whereas in the former view of

¹ For a recent study reflecting such a general view see, e.g., Ármann Jakobsson, "The Specter of Old Age: Nasty Old Men in the Sagas of Icelanders," *Journal of English and German Philology* 104 (2005): 297–325.

² Aristotle had regarded both youth, characterized by impatience, and old age, characterized by decay, as flawed compared to the prime of life, cf. Georges Minois, *History of Old Age*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 60–62.

³ The duality of beauty and ugliness expressed in the motif of *vanitas* continues to thrive in the Baroque period, and finds its reflection in literature and art of the period. Walther von der Vogelweide introduced the allegory of *Frau Welt* in Middle High German literature, beautiful from the front, but with an ugly and rotten back; Konrad von Würzburg's *Der Welt Lohn* popularizes the motif; and the cathedrals of Freiburg and Worms show sculptures of *Frau Welt*. See Wolfgang Stammeler's comprehensive overview, *Frau Welt: eine mittelalterliche Allegorie*. Freiburger Universitätsreden, N. F., 23 (Freiburg i. Ü.: Universitätsverlag, 1959).

⁴ Cicero's dialogue *De Senectute*, which he wrote as an old man, is an example of such a position (cf. Tim G. Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World* [Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003], 60–68). See also the contribution to this volume by Cristiana Sogno.

old age one has to fear the eternal fire of Hell due to the decadent side of the world and life lived without restraint, the latter seems to benefit from the proximity to a spiritual realm.

My focus for this essay is the textual representation of old age in the case of the first Grail king, Titurel, in Wolfram von Eschenbach's early thirteenth-century Middle High German works *Parzival* and *Titurel*. I will show that the representation of Titurel is not solely that of the beautiful, wise old man of mythical proportions, the predominant assessment of criticism to date.⁵ I will argue, instead, that Wolfram assigned Titurel a role on the margin coinciding with the reigning attitude toward old age as a disease to be feared in medieval society, which in turn helps us to understand the complexities of attitudes toward old age in medieval times.

My reading draws on recent invigorated interest in the representation of old age, exemplified by specific historical studies such as Shulamith Shahar's *Growing Old in the Middle Ages* from 1997.⁶ Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking *La Vieillesse* published first in 1970 and Georges Minois' *Histoire de la vieillesse: De l'antiquité à la renaissance* from 1987 triggered and were the basis for these investigations.⁷ In addition to those works, advances in the study of gerontology and the introduction of the concept of ageism describing age-based discrimination in today's society (and also in the past) invite us to question our own points of view when we discuss old age.⁸ How do we define old age? How do we talk about old age? Who is talking about old age? How much can we actually deduce from a text touching upon old age, and how much are we guided by our own preconceived notions or maybe even wishful thinking when examining the subject? These questions will direct me in this study.⁹

⁵ See, e.g., the introduction by Stephan Fuchs-Jolie to the 2003 edition of the *Titurel*: "Titurel ist als uralter, sagenhaft schöner, weiser Ahnherr und erster Hüter des Grals im 'Parzival' schattenhaft, fast geistgleich anwesend." Stephan Fuchs-Jolie, "Eine Einführung," Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Titurel*, ed. Helmut Brackert and Stephan Fuchs-Jolie (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2003), 3–24; here 8.

⁶ Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, transl. Yael Lotan (1995; London, New York: Routledge, 1997).

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, transl. Patrick O'Brian (New York: Putnam, 1972); Georges Minois, *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, transl. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (1987; Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989). For a more detailed review, see Albrecht Classen's introduction to this volume.

⁸ Robert N. Butler, "Ageism," *The Encyclopedia of Aging*, ed. George L. Maddox (New York: Springer, 1987), 22–23. Butler defines ageism "as a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for skin color and gender." Butler explained the concept of ageism first in "Age-ism: Another Form of Bigotry," *The Gerontologist* 9 (1969): 243–46.

⁹ The growing interest of gerontologists in the literary representation of old age has resulted in a number of longer studies, such as Linda A. Westervelt, *Beyond Innocence, or the 'Altersroman' in Modern Fiction* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), and Mike Hepworth, *Stories of Ageing*

Shahar comments on the "universal and unchanging aspects of old age."¹⁰ Old age is often regarded as a disease in itself since it is a stage of life commonly accompanied by illnesses, and to call a person "old and frail" constitutes almost a tautology.¹¹ Old age is, however, not a disease, but a law of life. Today, defining old age turns out to be increasingly problematic. Advances in medicine, and as a result an extended life span lived more actively show that age is a relative concept. Shahar relates the anecdote about a specialist discussing problems "among the old." When asked to specify the exact age at which someone is considered old, "He answered, smiling, 'An old person is one who is 15 years older than you.'"¹² This answer touches upon the relative positioning of the self when referring to old age. To use de Beauvoir's terminology, is old age seen "from without" or "from within"? Representation of old age from without—from a second-hand perspective—very likely differs from representation of old age from within, based on or influenced by one's own experiences. If the attitude toward old age was predominantly negative in the past—an admittedly general assumption, but supported by the majority of historical studies—we have to question to what degree a currently promoted positive picture in Western society of old age as "golden years" reflects reality. The pervasiveness of ageism today reveals that the negative view of old age resists change.¹³ The implications for the interpretation of a medieval text are twofold: The critic must, on the one hand, be aware of any preconception based on one's own positioning in current society and even personal stage in life. On the other hand, the positioning of the author of the text in question is likely to have played a role in the portrayal of old age. In short, we

(Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 173.

¹¹ De Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 19. Since de Beauvoir's time of writing, Western society prefers more than ever to focus on the healthy and vital octogenarian, and the hunched-over, frail and suffering disappear from the public view. In our time, death takes place preferably behind closed hospital doors.

¹² Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 12.

¹³ The introduction of the concept of ageism in 1969 resulted in more positive attitudes toward the aged, but they persist to be stereotypical. Current popular culture no longer neglects the aged in the media; however old age in itself is often ridiculed as in "over the hill" greeting cards in the US. For a more recent discussion of ageism and prejudice, cf. Todd D. Nelson, "Ageism: Prejudice Against Our Feared Old Self," *Journal of Social Issues* 61 (2005): 207–21. Nelson also points out that the positive view of the aged as carriers of wisdom and preservers of tradition changed with the advent of the printing press which eased the dissemination of knowledge, as well as the industrial revolution stressing mobility, and manual labor demanding physical strength. For the general ageist attitude across cultures, cf. also Amy J. C. Cuddy, Michael I. Norton, and Susan T. Fiske, "This Old Stereotype: The Pervasiveness and Persistence of the Elderly Stereotype," *Journal of Social Issues* 61 (2005): 267–86. For a discussion of negative stereotypes concerning old women in the Middle Ages, see the contributions to this volume by Gretchen Mieszkowski, Karen Pratt, and Connie Scarborough.

should not disregard whose voice is speaking. The old aged are rarely assigned a voice of their own.¹⁴

The significance of cultural variables emerges when considering aspects like gender and social standing. In medieval times old age could be less negative for men than for women. An old man could be wise and knowing, especially if he was of high social status. An old woman, in contrast, was more likely to be perceived as mean, wicked, or even a witch, particularly if she was not married, and most especially if she was independent, and knowledgeable, and showed it.¹⁵ The attitude of medieval society toward old age was at least an ambivalent one. If we associate a wise sage with old age in the Middle Ages, this image is likely based on the assumption that fewer people reached old age, but if they did, they were considered wise. Surprisingly, recent research on population development in Europe in the Middle Ages shows that a much larger number of the population consisted of old people than previously thought.¹⁶ The mean life expectancy had increased likewise.¹⁷ If the aged seem not to exist, then this non-existence might be due to marginalization. With few exceptions, even rulers were young rather than old when assuming power. A household was passed on to the son if the father grew older and weak and could no longer join in battle with the same strength as in the prime of life. The old aged parents slowly disappeared into the background and almost ceased to exist, especially if they physically could no longer contribute to the household. They depended on the charity of their relatives.

¹⁴ Shahar states correctly that historians, unlike anthropologists, do not have the option of interviewing their subjects, which means that "the voice of the old person is rarely heard in the medieval sources. Such a voice might have told us more, and in a direct way, about the experience of the elderly in that society, and to what extent he outgrew the constraints of his specific culture, if at all." Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 173.

¹⁵ The *Malleus Maleficarum*, or *Hexenhammer*, from 1487 contends specifically that the *fascinatio*, or evil eye, is common in old women, and that "in some angry or disturbed old women this gaze may be sufficient to do real harm to young and impressionable minds and bodies. [. . .] These women are exactly the sort who are often witches." Cf. Hans Peter Broedel, *The 'Malleus Maleficarum' and the Construction of Witchcraft* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 23.

¹⁶ Josiah Cox Russell, "Population in Europe, 500–1500," *Fontana Economic History of Europe*, ed. Carlo M. Cipolla. Vol. I: *The Middle Ages* (Glasgow: Collins, 1972), 25–70. The exact definition of old age is problematic. Historians and geriatricians seem to divide in general between young adults (15–25 years), middle-aged adults (35–45 years), and elderly adults (older than 45). People in the Middle Ages themselves employed different "models," depending on the number of "stages of life" or "ages of man" in question. Some also distinguished between old and very old age. It is probably safe to say that a person entered old age in his or her mid–40s. For an overview of different stages of life cf. Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 14–17. See also the contribution to this volume by Marilyn Sandidge concerning the impact of epidemics on old people and the generational conflicts.

¹⁷ W. J. MacLennan and W. I. Sellers, "Ageing Through the Ages," *Proceedings of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh*, 29 (1999): 71–75.

The German proverbial statement of eating the *Gnadenbrot* (lit. "bread of charity") expresses this idea well.¹⁸ Several of the tales, passed on through the oral tradition and ultimately collected by the Grimms, illustrate my point. In the tale *Grandfather and Grandson*, the very old grandfather is no longer welcome to eat at the table. His son and daughter-in-law relegate him instead to eating behind the stove because he is too old to hold a spoon steadily in his hand and therefore spills his food. He even breaks his dish and is forced to eat from a wooden bowl.¹⁹ The grandson collects wood to make similar dishes for his parents to eat from once they get old. When the parents realize their cruel behavior, they cry and allow the old grandfather to return to the table.

Heinrich Kaufringer's *Die halbe Decke*, a *mære* from around 1400, tells a story parallel in structure to the Grimm's *Grandfather and Grandson*.²⁰ Here the grandfather is left to freeze without an adequate coat. The grandson asks for a coat from his father, but receives only one of poor quality, upon which the grandson insists on a second identical coat. When so granted he wishes to keep it for his own father to wear in old age. Ashamed the son treats his father from now on with respect.²¹ The motif of the unforgiving children, but compassionate grandchild in the Grimm's tale has thus its roots much earlier. According to the tale *The Duration of Life*, also in their collection, man has 70 years to live:

So man lives seventy years. The first thirty are his human years, which are soon gone; then is he healthy, merry, works with pleasure, and is glad of his life. Then follow the ass's eighteen years, when one burden after another is laid on him, he has to carry the

¹⁸ Jacob Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1854–1960), Vol. 8: 569–75: "GNADENBROT, n., zu gnade, f., III A, 'erbarmen, milde'. 1) zunächst, aber kaum noch literarisch nachweisbar, 'aus mitleid gereichte speise, mahlzeit', meist verallgemeinert und unsinnlich 'aus erbarmen gewährter unterhalt, sold', ohne gegenleistung von seiten des empfangenden; oft gleichbedeutend mit 'almsen': (ihm war) das gedächtnis dergestalt geschwächt, daz er sich derjenigen freunde gar nicht mehr erinnern konnte, bey denen er ehemede . . . das gnadenbrodt gegessen G. W. RABENER s. schr. (1777) 2, 63[. . .] 2) insbesondere der einem aus dem dienst geschiedenen aus gnade für den lebensabend gewährte unterhalt. er iszt das gnadenbrot kann bedeuten 'er ist alt, ausgedient, beiseitegesetzt': denn sein sohn, . . . bey dem der vater aus gnad und barmherzigkeit gewohnt habe, . . . hab ihm täglich vorgeworfen, er esse gnadenbrot MILLER Siegwart (1777) 641."

¹⁹ "There was once an old man, as old as the hills, whose eyes had grown dim, who had become deaf, and who trembled in the knees. When he sat at table he could hardly hold the spoon, and he would spill his soup on the tablecloth and some of it would dribble from his mouth as well." Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Selected Tales*, transl. Joyce Crick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 198.

²⁰ Heinrich Kaufringer, *Werke*, ed. Paul Sappier. I.: *Text* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1972), no. 21, 224–27.

²¹ Cf. Albrecht Classen's essay on "Old Age in the World of The Stricker and other Middle High German Poets: A Neglected Topic" in this volume. Classen discusses the text by Kaufringer in more detail in a study "Der alte Mensch in den spätmittelalterlichen Mæren: Die Komplexität der Alterserfahrung im Spätmittelalter aus mentalitätsgeschichtlicher Sicht," *Alterskulturen des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit*. Akten des 16. Internationalen Kongresses vom 16. bis 18. Oktober 2006, Krems a. d. D., ed. Elisabeth Vavra (forthcoming).

corn which feeds others, and blows and kicks are the reward of his faithful services. Then come the dog's twelve years, when he lies in the corner, and growls and has no longer any teeth to bite with, and when this time is over the monkey's ten years form the end. Then man is weak-headed and foolish, does silly things, and becomes the jest of the children.²²

In the better-known *Bremen Town Musicians*, the animals are even about to be killed because of their uselessness in old age, clearly an expression of the generally accepted hostility toward the old as useless members of a community. Even though the Grimms collected the tales in the nineteenth century, the stories reflect a much older oral tradition and provide useful insights regarding old age in earlier periods.

Going back in time, history provides many examples for the association of old age with illness and disease. In the second century, the physician Galen regarded old age as a stage between health and illness, and in the thirteenth century Roger Bacon went a step further by declaring old age specifically a disease.²³ Old age seen from without was and is not a desirable state in the Western world, in contrast to the East where old age demands respect. Christ dies in the prime of his life at around 30 years of age, but Buddha lives up to 80 after reaching perfection in the last stage of his life. Medieval iconography prefers the much younger Christ figure over the old man God. Notable exceptions of highly visible old men like Charlemagne and Frederick I Barbarossa serve as references for the role of the wise old ruler blessed by *fortuna caesarea*.²⁴ Their old age at time of death contributed to their legendary status, and their life stories were recounted time and again, consequently turning them into mythical figures.²⁵ The drowning of Frederick I Barbarossa in the river Saleph on his way to the Holy Land was, however, a reason for concern. Going back to old beliefs, a sudden death was considered a "mark of malediction" and as such shameful.²⁶ Christianity tried to

²² Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Household Tales*, transl. Margaret Hunt (London: George Bell, 1884), Vol. 2:276–77.

²³ Bacon also believed, however, that well-being in old age could be improved by a healthy life style, not much different from Galen's earlier conclusions, cf. Minois, *History of Old Age*, 176–77.

²⁴ Even though they were blessed by *fortuna* they easily could fall. Their persistence to stay on the top of the wheel of fortune associated with *fortuna* was, according to medieval thought, an attribute of *fortuna caesarea*, meaning being chosen to reign in the *ordo* determined by God. See F. Kampfers, "Die Fortuna Caesarea Kaiser Friedrichs II.," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 48 (1928): 208–29.

²⁵ It was not uncommon for members of the nobility to achieve old age, simply because of better living conditions from the regular availability of food and better hygiene. Reaching very old age, as in the case of Charlemagne and Frederick I Barbarossa, was exceptional. Charlemagne was 72, and Frederick I was about 70 at the time of death.

²⁶ Phillip Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, transl. Helen Weaver (1977; New York: Random House, 1982), 11. No stigma was attached to a sudden death in combat. That Frederick I died an unnatural death invited speculations regarding how long he could have lived if not struck by this unnatural end to

combat this attitude, but it prevailed, as we can see, in the many speculations and explanations surrounding the death of Frederick I.²⁷

The old aged Titirel in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (ca. 1205) and *Titirel* (ca. 1218/1220) has all the attributes for such a mythical figure in literature.²⁸ Titirel was once a ruler himself, and not just any ruler, but the first Grail King who received the Grail from Heaven. He outlived his son Frimutel who lost his life in a joust, and he is the grandfather of Anfortas, the present Grail king. Titirel's former high social standing is obvious and becomes even more elevated through his close connection to the Grail. He is also more advanced in old age, since he is not Anfortas's father but his grandfather. Titirel is therefore predisposed based on his social position and his advanced old age to play the role of the old sage, especially as the guardian of knowledge in reference to the Grail.

De Beauvoir characterizes such a positive role of an aged man as follows:

He already has one foot in the world of the dead: this marks him out for the role of intercessor between this world and the next, as well as giving him formidable powers."²⁹

So how does Wolfram represent the old aged Titirel? In his *Parzival*, Titirel appears two times in person. On one occasion his first appearance is recalled and explained; other than these three instances his name is only mentioned as the father of Frimutel for the sake of genealogy. *Parzival*, and with him the audience, catches a first glimpse of Titirel during the former's first unsuccessful visit to Munsalvaesche in Book V. The Grail has been presented, *Parzival* failed to ask the

his life. According to legend he never died, but is sitting half asleep at a table in the Kyffhäuser mountain waiting for the right moment of his return to glory and with it the glory of the land.

²⁷ For the representation of Frederick I in the sources see Heinz Krieg, *Herrscherdarstellung in der Stauferzeit. Friedrich Barbarossa im Spiegel seiner Urkunden und der staufigen Geschichtsschreibung* (Stuttgart: Thorbecke, 2003). For the history of this myth, see Rüdiger Krohn, „Friedrich I. Barbarossa: Barbarossa oder der Alte vom Berge: Zur neuzeitlichen Rezeption der Kyffhäuser-Sage,” *Herrscher, Helden, Heilige*, ed. Ulrich Müller and Werner Wunderlich (St. Gallen: UVK, 1996), 101–18.

²⁸ Wolfram's texts analyzed in this study are quoted from the following editions: Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, ed. Karl Lachmann, transl. Peter Knecht, intr. Bernd Schirok (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003); Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Titirel*, ed. Helmut Brackert and Stephan Fuchs-Jolie (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003). The criticism is limited in the case of *Titirel*, but abundant for *Parzival*. For the purposes of this study I confine my citations to those that are essential. Both editions provide bibliographies for the work in question. For an introduction to Wolfram von Eschenbach, see Joachim Bumke, *Wolfram von Eschenbach* (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 2004). For a book-length study on *Titirel*, see Albrecht Classen, *Utopie und Logos: Vier Studien zu Wolframs von Eschenbach Titirel. Beiträge zur älteren Literaturgeschichte* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1990). More recently, see also Alexander Sager, *Minne von mæren: on Wolfram's „Titirel.”. Transatlantische Studien zu Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Unipress, 2006).

²⁹ De Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age*, 43.

question, and the tables are now cleared after the meal. In a separate room Parzival notices an old man with silvery grey hair, one who is at the same time the most beautiful of all the men he has ever seen. He can only briefly catch a glimpse before the doors are closed again.³⁰ Wolfram might very well have teased his audience by stating that he is only later going to tell more about this grey old man. At this point, Titurel remains nameless and does not speak. He resembles more a grey and somewhat blurry shadow in the foggy margin. Wolfram evokes such an association by comparing the old man's hair to the deepest fog: "er was noch grâwer dan der tuft" (244, 30) was more silvery even than hoar-frost. Only later in Book IX does Wolfram reveal the identity of the old man. After restless wanderings, Parzival spends time with the hermit Trevrizent, who also happens to be his uncle. Trevrizent relates the story of the Grail and its connection to his own family. Parzival now knows how the Grail was handed down to Anfortas, the current Grail king, via Titurel and Frimutel but he still does not know that the old man he saw was actually Titurel. It is only at the end of his stay with Trevrizent that Parzival inquires almost as an afterthought about the old grey man who was shown the Grail in a separate room. Only now is he given a name: Titurel, the first Grail king.³¹ Trevrizent explains that the Grail keeps Titurel from dying and also preserves his beauty; he therefore exists in a space removed from the court in a liminal state between living and dying. Again his hair is described as grey, but his skin is white and soft, which explains why Parzival was struck by Titurel's beauty, even though he saw him only briefly. Trevrizent relates further that Titurel suffers from podagra, which is gout of the foot. He tells Parzival also that the court uses him for advice, and that he once was a powerful knight himself. Titurel does not appear in person in this scene, but he becomes indirectly present when Parzival recalls the moment of his first and only encounter with him.

³⁰ „an eime spanbette er sach / in einer kemenâten / ê si nâch in zuo getâten, / den aller schœnsten alten man / des er kûnde ie gewan. / ich magez wol sprechen âne guft, / er was noch grâwer dan der tuft" (240, 24–30; On a sling-bed in a chamber, before the doors had been shut behind them, Parzival glimpsed the most handsome old man he had ever seen or heard of, whose hair I can assert without exaggeration was more silvery even than hoar-frost). The *Parzival* translations cited are taken from Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, transl. A. T. Hatto (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980).

³¹ "wer was ein man lac vorme grâl? / der was al grâ bî liehtem vel." / der wirt sprach 'daz was Titurel' (501, 20–22; "Who was the man lying before the Grail, his silvery hair contrasting with his clear skin?" "It was Titurel," his host replied). That Wolfram reveals the name only now is possibly also due to a desire to keep Parzival, and with him the audience, in suspense in order to increase the moment of surprise. A planned and directed succession of acts of "recognition" for Parzival and the listeners, if so intended by Wolfram, does not conflict with the fact that Titurel is marginalized. D. H. Green and Joachim Bumke examined aspects of recognition in *Parzival* in detail in their studies: D. H. Green, *The Art of Recognition in Wolfram's 'Parzival'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Joachim Bumke, *Die Blutstropfen im Schnee. Über Wahrnehmung und Erkenntnis im "Parzival"* (Wolfram von Eschenbach. Hermaea. Germanistische Forschungen. Neue Folge, 94 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2001).

Titurel is old and most beautiful on the one hand—Parzival sees “den aller schönsten alten man” (240, 27)—but he also suffers from a most painful ailment, which may appear somewhat puzzling. Titurel's beauty explains indirectly Parzival's beauty because they are both members of the Grail family.³² Gout used to be a disease of the wealthy, because it is typically triggered by a diet high in meat and the consumption of alcohol; in fact, it became an almost fashionable aristocratic disease by the seventeenth century. Illustrations of sour faced, cranky old men afflicted by podagra become numerous in this period.³³ Hippocrates commented early on that eunuchs do not suffer from gout, nor does a young person until after intercourse, suggesting a relationship between podagra and sexuality.³⁴ Overindulgence was therefore not only limited to food. Adam is also believed to have suffered from podagra in old age—an indication of the transgression of eating from the Tree of Life, an overindulgence in wanting more than is plentiful.³⁵

Titurel's gout establishes that the Grail may prevent anyone who sees it from dying during the following week, but the Grail cannot heal. Likewise the Grail keeps everyone beautiful as in young years, but it cannot prevent one from turning grey:

Ouch wart nie menschen sô wê,
swelhes tages ez den stein gesiht,
die wochen mac ez sterben niht,
diu aller schierst dar nâch gestêt.
sîn varwe im nimmer ouch zergêt:
man muoz im sölher varwe jehn,

³² Cf. Bumke, *Die Blutstropfen im Schnee*, 84, fn. 180.

³³ Cf. Roy Porter and G. S. Rousseau, *Gout: The Patrician Malady* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998). In the high Middle Ages gout, regarded a disease of old age, was identified with St. Maur, indicating a trend toward complication and specialization in medieval medicine. Cf. Katherine Park, “Medicine and Society in Medieval Europe,” *Medicine in Society, 500–1500*, ed. Andrew Wear (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 59–90; here 75. According to Park, 79, the major principles of medieval medicine were based on the teachings of Hippocrates, Galen, and Arabic followers of their teachings, which were translated into Latin by the end of the eleventh century. Wolfram's specific use of podagra for the affliction of gout in the foot speaks again for his broad knowledge. He says: “ein siechtuom heizet pôgrât / treit er, die leme helfelôs” (501, 26–27; a laming disease named podagra). For the relationship between aristocratic nutrition and podagra in the Middle Ages, see also Ernst Schubert, *Essen und Trinken im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Primus, 2006), 104, 235, 248 (“Gicht” in German).

³⁴ “Eunuchs are not subject to gout, nor do they become bald. [...] A youth does not suffer from gout until after sexual intercourse.” *Hippocratic Writings*, ed. G. E. R. Lloyd, transl. J. Chadwick and W. N. Mann (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 229.

³⁵ Arthur Groos, *Romancing the Grail: Genre, Science, and Quest in Wolfram's 'Parzival'* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 149. Parzival and Titurel are also both descendants of Mazadan, the “son of Adam.”

dâ mit ez hât den stein gesehn,
 ez sî maget oder man,
 als dô sîn bestiu zît huop an,
 sæh ez den stein zwei hundert jâr
 im enwurde denne grâ sîn hâr.

[469, 14–24; “Further: however ill a mortal may be, from the day on he sees this Stone he cannot die for that week, nor does he lose his colour. For if anyone, maid or man, were to look at the Grail for two hundred years, you would have to admit that his colour was as fresh as in his early prime, except that his hair would grey!”]

Titurel’s podagra is therefore not only a typical sign of old age, but also a disease that does not spare former kings and even resists the Grail. The Grail as such can provide nourishment, but not healing, as is also the case with Anfortas. Titurel’s suffering mirrors that of Anfortas, and is the result of the latter’s sexual transgression in his youth (*Amor was sîn krîe. / Der ruoft ist zer dêmuot / iedoch nicht volleclîchen guot* (478, 30–479, 3; His battle-cry was „Amor!”, yet that shout is not quite right for humility). Anfortas is punished accordingly in a joust when the poisoned tip of a lance of a heathen knight hits him in his testes, a clear allusion to his former sexual transgression. This wound is the cause of Anfortas’s ongoing suffering. Correspondingly Titurel suffers from a most painful disease owing to Anfortas’s transgression, even though he is still beautiful as in his youth because of the Grail. Titurel’s podagra could be seen as parallel to Anfortas’s injured testes. The latter can no longer walk, and Anfortas can neither ride a horse, nor walk, neither lie nor stand, only lean without being able to sit.³⁶ Titurel’s liminal existence is underlined by the way the Grail, in its nature, is close to being the Heavenly Kingdom on earth, but indeed only an “approximation,” hence, it does not possess the power to heal either Titurel or Anfortas.³⁷ The fate of the two is intertwined.

Because of the pain associated with gout, those who suffered from it were commonly labeled as irritable and cranky. Perhaps a courtly medieval audience would have envisioned Titurel as such a cranky old man. That Titurel was likewise in much pain and not in the best of moods must have been evident. Even though he looks beautiful on the outside, the disease inside makes him unable to move and draws him even closer to death; he exists as a living dead in a liminal space, solely being sustained by seeing, and therefore being kept alive by the Grail.

³⁶ Er mac gerîten noch gegên, / der kûnec, noch geligen noch gestên: / er lent, âne sitzen (491, 1–3; The king is unable either to ride or walk or even to lie down or stand—he reclines—he does not sit.).

³⁷ Groos, *Romancing the Grail*, 149, fn.16, employs the term “approximation” which expresses the closeness of Grail and Heavenly Kingdom, or paradise, nicely. Cf. *wan der grâl was der sælden frucht, / der werlde sœze ein sôlh genuht, / er wac vil nâch gelîche / als man saget von himelrîche* (238, 21–24; for the Grail was the very fruit of bliss, a cornucopia of the sweets of this world and such that it scarcely fell short of what they tell us of the Heavenly Kingdom).

Of what significance is the fact that Titirel is not eating? Caroline Walker Bynum has made the connection between fasting and food as a religious symbol.³⁸ Women were more associated with food preparation and less with food consumption. Some sources show women cooking and serving food, and then watching the consumption of food by men at the banquet from balconies, suggesting a separation of women from men. Food was the one item women controlled, and fasting—meaning actively giving up food—was one way that “women controlled themselves and their world.”³⁹ Through their asceticism, women mystics consumed the Body of Christ in the Eucharist and “transfigured and became more fully the flesh and the food that their own bodies were.”⁴⁰ One could argue that Titirel also inhabits a space away from the court, and fasting is his only way to express his wish to finally die, and to become one with the body of Christ. However, his explicit suffering, specifically from podagra and being bedridden, underlines his passivity whereas intentional fasting implies a purposeful and active involvement. Titirel's suffering ties him also to Anfortas's suffering. It is, therefore, not controlled saintly asceticism as an act of *imitatio Christi*, particularly since this phenomenon is typically associated with female saints.⁴¹

The second and last time Titirel appears is at the end of Book XVI. Parzival has fulfilled his journey, he has asked the redeeming question and is now the Grail king. His half-brother Feirefiz accompanies him as the Grail is presented, but he tells Parzival later that he did not see the Grail. However, Titirel knows the

³⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, “Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women,” *Representation* 11 (1985): 1–25.

³⁹ Walker Bynum, “Fast, Feast, and Flesh,” 10.

⁴⁰ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food for Late Medieval Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 275.

⁴¹ Walker Bynum, “Fast, Feast, and Flesh,” 5, relates that Gerard from Cologne lived as a hermit in a tree, fed only from manna sent from God, an interesting parallel to Sigune. In *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), Walker Bynum comments that these miracles of living by eating only the Eucharist were probably regarded as characteristics of saintly women “because both medical literature and misogynist tracts characterized the female body as more changeable than the male,” 221. She also points out that “triumph over process” was not limited to the female body. From the early eleventh to the early thirteenth century we have stories by spiritual writers “that emphasized the hardening and beauty all saintly bodies might achieve on earth.” Some authors also assumed “that the bodies of ascetics would reflect the beauty, clarity, and agility of their souls.” One author related that the corpse of a saint “suddenly renewed with whiteness and rosiness,” 222. Titirel and also Anfortas could both be associated with such a transformation. Anfortas changes into the most beautiful of men after he is redeemed and healed by Parzival, with Parzival's own beauty nothing next to Anfortas' rosy complexion: *swaz der Franzoyz heizt flôri, / der glast kom sînem velle bi. / Parziuâls schæn was nu ein wint* (796, 5–7; The luster which the French call ‘fleur’ entered his complexion – Parzival's beauty was as nothing beside it). Anfortas's transformation could signify that he has reached the stage of Titirel's beauty, possibly also a sign of Titirel's imminent death.

answer to the mystery of Feirefiz's spiritual blindness. This time he is speaking, and he wants to let the others know that Feirefiz could not see the Grail because he is a heathen and not baptized.⁴² With that, Titurel disappears out of the picture.

One could argue that Wolfram kept the figure of Titurel blurry and foggy on purpose in order to stress his position as closer to death and removed from those living in the world and partaking in courtly society. It appears as if Titurel is only kept alive to explain, at the end, why Feirefiz is not capable of seeing the Grail. So it is his ancient knowledge of the Grail which Wolfram stresses. Titurel solves the mystery of why Parzival's half-brother Feirefiz cannot see the Grail, but this happens only by coincidence. No one specifically asks for his counsel, the news of the mystery simply reaches him in his bed (*diz mære och Titurel vernam, / der alte betterise lam*, 813, 15–16; The aged, bedridden Titurel, too, came to hear of it). Only now Wolfram assigns him a voice, but since nobody has actively sought Titurel's advice, there is also no one from the court present to take note, and the spatially removed Titurel has to pass on his knowledge with the help of a messenger: *daz enbôt er in den palas* (813, 23; This message he sent to the Palace.). Titurel appears truly only on the margin. He possesses no power whatsoever; his age and illness confine him to the margins. The reign has long ago been passed on, first to Frimutel and then to his grandson Anfortas. Consequently Wolfram does not explain further what happens to Titurel in the end. He is no longer of any importance or "use" for the story line – now, that Anfortas is healed and the reign is passed on, Titurel has fulfilled his role as advisor to a floundering Grail kingdom, and he is obsolete. More positively, he is finally allowed to die after elucidating why the Grail was invisible to Feirefiz. Titurel's fate is insignificant; the future belongs to the children of Parzival and Condwiramurs as well as those of Feirefiz and Respanse de Schoye. The extent, however, to which Titurel is marginalized, is striking. His gout as an explanation for being bedridden and removed from court appears weak, since it was not uncommon at the time for sufferers to be carried from place to place. Titurel is thus not only marginalized due to his disability but also his old age.⁴³ Titurel speaks only once when

⁴² *Diz mære och Titurel vernam, / der alte betterise lam. / der sprach 'ist ez ein heidensch man, / sô darf er des niht willen hân / daz sîn ougn âns toufes kraft / bejagen die geselleschaft / daz si den grâl beschouwen: / da ist hâmit für gehouwen.'* / (813, 17–22; The aged, bedridden Titurel, too, came to hear of it. 'He is a heathen man,' he said, 'and should not aspire without benefit of Baptism to have his eyes share with the others' in contemplating the Grail. A fence has been raised before it.'). One could possibly argue for another connection with Anfortas's fate: he sustains his injury from a heathen, Titurel knows that a heathen cannot see the Grail, Feirefiz is consequently baptized, and Anfortas's wound is healed once and for all. Against such a reading speaks that Anfortas's healing precedes Feirefiz's baptism.

⁴³ For new approaches to teaching and literature on the basis of Disability Studies, see *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: MLA Press, 2002). See also the contribution to this volume by Sarah Gordon.

explaining the mystery of the invisibility of the Grail. His importance as the keeper of knowledge is not even recognized. He has no voice of his own until the end; others explain his condition, no emotions are expressed, no compassion for the old aged former Grail king, who must have been suffering already for a long time. Wolfram more or less utilizes Titirel in the role of the old aged one who first received the Grail, still knowing a mystery unknown or long forgotten by others.⁴⁴

The image of the beautiful and wise old Titirel represents only one side of the coin, while the other reveals an old man in his lonely chamber, suffering from gout and no longer able to walk, who is kept more or less artificially alive, solely for the sake of his knowledge of the answer to one question. Wolfram does not relate how exactly the news regarding Feirefiz reaches Titirel since nobody asks Titirel for his advice, he does not even acknowledge the wisdom of this old Titirel, but rather utilizes him. The old man, even if wise, appears not to fit in with the invigorated and rejuvenated Grail court.⁴⁵

Wolfram's very old Titirel in his *Parzival* was probably composed at a much earlier stage of Wolfram's own life and therefore further removed from the personal experience of the within, the perception of old age from someone experiencing it, but such a statement must remain hypothetical even though research agrees that *Titirel* emerged some time after 1217, only after the completion of *Parzival*. The speculative age of Wolfram at the time of composition aside, the figure of Titirel in the fragments with the same title is a much different one. The main protagonist in *Titirel* is Schionatulander, and the two fragments tell of the love between Schionatulander and Parzival's cousin Sigune, and its implied tragic end with the death of Schionatulander before the arrival of Parzival on the scene.⁴⁶ Before the love between the two main protagonists evolves, Wolfram provides the family history of both preceded by Titirel's monologue. Right from the beginning it is evident that Wolfram could hardly have portrayed the same person more differently.

Even with a focus on function—this younger Titirel bids farewell to his former life as a king, which has been seen as foreshadowing of the separation of Schionatulander and Sigune through the death of the former—this Titirel must have evoked more emotions. This Titirel has a voice of his own. Perhaps Wolfram

⁴⁴ Titirel is also in the position of the carrier of memory here, which may be understood as an indication of his moral strength, cf. Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), for a detailed discussion on the meaning of memory.

⁴⁵ Shahr, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 51, notes: "The figure of the upright, hoary, wise-eyed old man was as rare in Medieval writings as that of the white-haired, kind-faced, bright-eyed old woman." Bumke, *Die Blutstropfen im Schnee*, 151, fn. 128, also reads the Grail as responsible for keeping Titirel artificially alive ("künstlich am Leben erhalten").

⁴⁶ In other words, *Titirel* is a prequel to *Parzival*.

envisioned this Titurel as being old, but not very old yet, again stressing the ambiguity of old age. The Grail king passes on his crown and rule to his only son Frimutel, signifying that he has reached the stage of old age.

Wolfram introduces Titurel to his audience as someone who used to be strong when still able to move fully around, a fierce man who led his men without any hesitation bravely into battle. Now Titurel is older and he realizes that he is about to enter a new stage in his life. He understands that he can no longer lead in battle and has to give up his lance. He reminisces about how proudly he participated in battle when younger. He explains that his lance used to be as fast as the wind and powerful in destroying the lances of his enemies, his sword marked many a helmet. The joys of *hohe minne*, of true courtly love, are now foreign to him, even though his soul yearns for these past joys. Only his reputation remains and can never be damaged. Likewise, the pure elevation of his heart caused by the smile granted by a lady a long time ago stays with him and only death can take it away from him. It is the memories of pleasures from the past that will remain with him, and the future holds nothing more than the joy of looking back to the active and fulfilled life of the past.

An almost elegiac tone defines this speech. In the last three strophes of his monologue, Titurel recalls how he was chosen to be the first Grail king and he then appeals to his only son Frimutel to be a worthy heir. It is time for the son to be on his own; Titurel is no longer strong enough for both of them: *nu wer dich, sun, aleine! Mîn kraft wil uns beiden enpliehen* (8, 4; Now defend yourself alone, my son, for my strength is deserting both of us).⁴⁷ The onset of old age is marked by the loss of strength and subsequently the ability to fight in battle. No longer strong enough to use either lance or sword, both phallic symbols, the loss of strength is also marked by the loss of sexuality. With the onset of old age, man turns weak and useless. Therefore the joys of courtly love or worldly pleasures are now a matter of the past, only memories may last.

Old age is nothing to look forward to, but is an inevitable stage of life, marked by disease or even a disease itself that man has to accept, regardless of social status. In the case of Titurel and the Middle Ages at large, old age and death may be lamented or feared, but are not "fought." The fighting takes place at the prime of life in battle before the onset of old age, at least in the case of men with higher social standing. In the present, fighting pertains not only to the prime of life, but rather may happen in the face of severe illness and death.

Susan Sontag, in her essay on *Illness as Metaphor*, comments on the use of military language by those who are faced with an unknown or terminal illness. A disease without a cure can be seen as a metaphor for the evil and bad, a precursor

⁴⁷ The *Titurel* translations cited are taken from Wolfram von Eschenbach, *'Titurel' and the 'Songs'*, ed. and transl. Marion E. Gibbs and Sidney M. Johnson (New York and London: Garland, 1988).

of death. Today, fewer and fewer people depend on physical strength to fight negative forces, such as battle and war, during the course of their lives. Instead diseases have become the enemy of mankind. The "language of warfare" is now commonplace when discussing therapies, and the disease itself is fought like a colonial war invading the body.⁴⁸ Standing on the threshold to old age marks for the Middle Ages a stage closer to death in order to prepare for death as the door to the ultimate goal of eternal life.⁴⁹ Death should therefore ideally be embraced and not feared, and melancholy consequently was believed to be an indication of the lack of belief in the final redemption through the grace of God.⁵⁰ Old age represented the approaching end of life, inevitable and as such may be also more acceptable. Titarel concludes his speech with a forward glance to the future by stating the positive traits of Frimutel's five children. This Titarel on the threshold to the stage of old age might evoke even more empathy today considering the reigning attitude toward death in the Western world in contrast to that of Wolfram's time, which held a more matter-of-fact approach to death. And Wolfram concludes:

Sus was der starke Titarel worden der swache,
beidiu von grôzen alter unt von siechenheit ungemache.

⁴⁸ Cf. Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978). A 2005 newspaper article from *USA Today* (March 3, 2005: Liz Szabo, "For children with cancer, treatment cuts both ways") explicitly illustrates this point: "Therapies are gentler today than those prescribed twenty years ago. But doctors still play a careful balancing act, selecting weapons that are powerful enough to eradicate cancer when it lurks but that stop short of killing their patients." The article continues that one oncologist "compares those harsh methods to a grenade, which obliterates the enemy as well as everything around it" (see also the online version at: http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2005-05-03-kids-cancer-cover_x.htm [last accessed on Feb. 20, 2007]). It is the unresolved mystery of a disease and with it the fear of death that are fought today, while suffering from not entirely understood diseases like cancer and AIDS results in the patient unwillingly being tainted by association alone. It would be interesting to find out the attitude toward podagra in the Middle Ages. Since it affected more the wealthy population a parallel in attitude toward cancer and AIDS today might appear far-fetched, and leprosy and with it the stigmatization of lepers comes to mind. But even among lepers there existed a distinction between rich and poor. Michel Foucault argues that madness took the place of leprosy at the end of the Middle Ages as a means to deal with outsiders and the poor. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, transl. Richard Howard (1961; New York: Pantheon Books, 1995). Any association with podagra, even if regarded as the disease of kings, must have caused at least uneasiness for onlookers.

⁴⁹ See the contribution to this volume by Scott Taylor for further discussions of old age as an important stage in life to prepare for death.

⁵⁰ Shulamith Shahar, "Old Age in the High and Late Middle Ages: Image, Expectation and Status," *Old Age from Antiquity to Post-Modernity*, ed. Paul Johnson and Pat Thane (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 43–63; here 45.

[12, 1–2; Thus strength was lost to mighty Titurel, both through old age and the ravages of sickness].

With this comment Wolfram bids farewell to Titurel, who now leaves the stage, and the focus turns first to Frimutel's daughter Schoysiane and then finally her daughter Sigune. Now Frimutel as the king in power becomes the point of reference, hence the introduction of Schoysiane as the daughter of Frimutel rather than the granddaughter of Titurel.

Whatever the reaction of Wolfram's audience to Titurel's monologue might have been, the difference of the two Titurel figures leaves no room to argue. Wolfram could have done very well without Titurel's long monologue if he simply wished to recall how Titurel was chosen Grail king. The understanding of the farewell speech as parallel to and a precursor of the imminent death of Schionatulander is not that obvious in light of the farewell of Titurel as a marker for the onset of old age—a natural stage in the life of man—whereas the cause of Schionatulander's death is unnatural and happens in the prime of his life. It appears even more likely that Wolfram's older, but within the story line actually much younger Titurel—his son Frimutel is still alive—voices more emotions, because Wolfram himself was possibly no longer performing from the outside but rather from within, and probably facing his own approaching old age.

Walther von der Vogelweide's famous *Owê, was sint verschwunden alliu mine jâr* (no. 97; Lachmann 124, 1) conveys similar emotions to those found in Titurel's farewell speech.⁵¹ Already in the earlier *Reichston*, Walther introduced himself in the pose of the thinker and ponderer as he is known from the much later illustrations in the manuscripts of the *Heidelberger* and *Weingartener Liederhandschrift*. In the so-called *Alterselegie* he looks back on his life. The roles of the "I-Walther" (Walther the person) and the "I-performer" (Walther, the performer at court) are blurry and indistinguishable. Like Titurel he remembers the past, but in much more detail. And Walther also bemoans the inability to join in battle, which in turn could be understood by those in their prime as a call to join the crusade of Frederick II.⁵² Whether propaganda was Walther's first and

⁵¹ Cited from: Walther von der Vogelweide, *Leich, Lieder, Sangsprüche*, ed. Christoph Cormeau (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996).

⁵² The *Elegie*, or *Altersklage*, is one of Walther's best known songs, and has been discussed widely. A review provide cf. Bernd Volkmann, 'Owê, war sint verschwunden.' Die 'Elegie' Walthers von der Vogelweide: *Untersuchungen, kritischer Text, Kommentar*. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 483 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1987); Françoise Salvan-Renucci, "Nochmals zu Walther's 'Elegie,'" *Walther von der Vogelweide: Actes du Colloque du Centre d'Études Médiévales de l'Université de Picardie Jules Verne* 1995, ed. Danielle Buschinger and Wolfgang Spiewok. Wodan, 52. Serie 3: Tagungsbände und Sammelnschriften, 30 (Greifswald: Reineke, 1995), 125–50, and others. For old age and *minne* in Walther, cf. Christoph Cormeau, "Minne und Alter. Beobachtungen zur pragmatischen Einbettung des Altersmotivs bei Walther von der Vogelweide," *Mittelalterbilder aus neuer Perspektive*.

foremost intention with this song will remain a mystery in the end. The call to join the crusade as a welcome and maybe even intentional side effect is a possibility, but a side effect nevertheless.⁵³ Entering the stage of old age was not that desirable after all and was signified precisely by the ineligibility and thus exclusion from partaking in battle.⁵⁴

Is Wolfram's earlier, but older Titurel in the end a grumpy old man or does he represent the old and wise? It is impossible to provide here a simple answer since both are valid and depend on various aspects in the representation of old age. Likewise, old age in the Middle Ages is not one-sided, but rather has many facets as in the case of *Titurel*. Ageism is not an invention of our time as we can see in the case of the figure of Titurel in Wolfram's *Parzival*.

In the final analysis, the representation of the figure of the first Grail king in Wolfram's *Parzival* and *Titurel* is of interest as a reference for the representation of old age in Middle High German literature. Wolfram utilizes in the former the figure of Titurel for the answer to one specific question pertaining to the mystery of the Grail, whereas he is given a voice of his own in the latter. Consequently there emerges a picture reflecting a position on old age in Wolfram: the acceptance of old age as a natural stage of life. There is no attempt to stave off and battle ageing. The old Grail king's long suffering in *Parzival* underlines such a position. This suffering could further be read as tied to the pain and suffering of Titurel's grandson Anfortas. Titurel's podagra in *Parzival* represents in this case a weaker reflection of Anfortas's open wound. But as is so often the case with Wolfram, multiple associations could very well have been intentional. With Wolfram we have the rare opportunity to observe how a medieval author portrays the same figure, but more or less in opposition to each other. This opposition is not only due

Diskussionsanstöße zu amour courtois, Subjektivität in der Dichtung und Strategien des Erzählens. Kolloquium Würzburg 1984, ed. Ernstpeter Ruhe and Rudolf Behrens. *Beiträge zur romanischen Philologie des Mittelalters*, 14 (Munich: Fink, 1985), 147–65; Ute von Bloh, "Zum Altersthema in Minneliedern des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts: Der 'Einbruch' der Realität," *Walther von der Vogelweide. Beiträge zu Produktion, Edition und Rezeption*, ed. Thomas Bein. *Walther-Studien*, 1 (Frankfurt a. M., Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 2002), 117–44. See also the contribution to this volume by Albrecht Classen. The reference to or dealing with Walther is not the major point in your contribution, do I remember that incorrectly? I am afraid it will look übertrieben if I am mentioning your contribution too often, but may be I am mistaken? I leave this up to you.

⁵³ George F. Jones understands the song primarily as "propaganda of the first order" which is, in my opinion, somewhat one-sided. It seems hard to imagine that Walther wrote here only a cunning propaganda piece without any personal understanding of what it felt like to have entered the stage of old age himself. Cf. George F. Jones, *Walther von der Vogelweide*. *Twayne's World Authors Series: Austria*, 46 (New York: Twayne, 1968), 136.

⁵⁴ The possibility of Walther composing the song at a younger age, but speaking in the voice of a more experienced old man, appears to be slim if it is taken into account that old age was not necessarily associated with elevated authority. Memory, and with it knowledge, is likewise not a guarantor for more authority in courtly society as in the case of the very old Titurel.

to a difference in role and function for the respective work.⁵⁵ The difference in representation of the Grail king Titurel is additionally marked by his marginalization in *Parzival*, whereas Wolfram assigns him a spirited voice in *Titurel*.

⁵⁵ Since *Titurel* exists only as fragments all attempts to establish a function or relationship between the two fragments must remain speculative.

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Old Age in the World of The Stricker and Other Middle High German Poets: A Neglected Topic¹

In his monumental didactic treatise, *Der Renner* (ca. 1300), the Franconian poet Hugo von Trimberg (ca. 1230–after 1313) takes stock of almost every aspect relevant in human life, commenting and critiquing a wide range of values, customs, habits, traditions, attitudes, ideas, and manners.² Considering the vast dissemination of this voluminous didactic work in seventy-two manuscripts and one early print, Hugo's statements can be regarded as highly influential and representative of the history of thirteenth-century mentality, if not of the entire Middle Ages.³ Not surprisingly, he also turns to old age and specifically to old people as an important social group that deserves his critical attention.

As everyone can simply observe, life is determined by the unavoidable process of growing old, which affects all sentient, and in a way also insentient beings. Old age takes away strength and imposes suffering, it blinds people and weakens them in every physical way, and especially steals the beauty of youth and the enjoyment of life: "Alter nimt uns kurzewîle" (8077). The list of drawbacks to old age in animals, birds, and man is very long, and culminates in the statement that "Alter machet widerzême / Manic dinc, daz vor was genême" (23081–82; Old Age makes many things disagreeable that used to be pleasant before).⁴

¹ I would like to thank Marilyn Sandidge, Westfield State College, and Karen Pratt, King's College London, for their careful reading of my article.

² Rudolf Kilian Weigand, *Der "Renner" des Hugo von Trimberg: Überlieferung, Quellenabhängigkeit und Struktur einer spätmittelalterlichen Lehrdichtung*. Wissensliteratur im Mittelalter, 36 (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2000).

³ Helmut Birkhan, *Geschichte der altdutschen Literatur im Licht ausgewählter Texte*. Part VIII: *Lehrhafte Dichtung zwischen 1200 und 1300*. Edition Praesens Studienbücher, 17 (Vienna: Praesens, 2005), 51–63; for an overview of the entire genre of medieval German didactic literature, see Bernhard Sowinski, *Lehrhafte Dichtung des Mittelalters*. Sammlung Metzler, 103 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1971); Bruno Boesch, *Lehrhafte Literatur: Lehre in der Dichtung und Lehrdichtung im deutschen Mittelalter*. Grundlagen der Germanistik, 21 (Berlin: Schmidt, 1977).

⁴ Hugo von Trimberg, *Der Renner*, ed. Gustav Ehrismann. Mit einem Nachwort und Ergänzungen von Günther Schweikle. Deutsche Neudrucke. Reihe: Texte des Mittelalters, vol. 3 (1909; Berlin: de

Those who used to be strong and mighty warriors, are killed in battle because of old age), but no one else would be exempt from this force of nature, or life, either (32087–89). Old age, and then death, represent the end of all worldly joys: “Dâ werltlîchiu fröude ein ende hât” (23090).

On the other hand, obviously in rather typical medieval fashion, before he breaks out into these laments, he also mocks those who have little understanding about old age and know only how to complain about their physical decline, their pain, and weakness: “Der alte ist selten âne klage” (23023; the old person hardly ever refrains from complaining). The wise person, on the other hand, would not focus on the loss of material goods, especially of his youth; instead he ought to think of the afterlife and Heaven. In fact, only those who can discard all links to this world can hope to achieve salvation of their soul: “Swêr êwigez leben wil erwerben, / In dem muoz vor diu werlt sterben” (23033–34).

Longing for this temporary, but treacherous, existence would prevent the Christian from repenting all his sins and receiving the Church’s absolution just in time before his/her death (23085–86). In fact, Hugo expresses his astonishment about a new phenomenon in his society. Increasingly, as he comments, people object to their growing old and try to create the false impression of their youthfulness (23037–46)—which sounds suspiciously like certain trends in the postmodern world with its prejudices and actual fears of growing old, ageism.⁵ Those, on the other hand, who know who they are and who are content with their appearance and age could be called wise: “Er ist besunder ein sêlic man, / Der selber sich geschätzen kan, / Swenne in kumer oder alter twinget!” (23047–49; He is a truly blessed man who can accept himself whether he is burdened by sorrow or old age). Hardly anyone would ever reach the age of eighty or more years, and monetary wealth would not prevent the aging process at all (23154–57). People should be called fools who would place more emphasis on the pleasure of the body than on the salvation of the soul (23159–62).

In conformity with much medieval thought, perhaps best represented by Pope Innocent III’s *De miseria humanae conditionis* (1195),⁶ Hugo expresses his contempt

Gruyter, 1970), 23081–82; for a comprehensive survey of the major themes touched upon by Hugo von Trimberg, see Jutta Goheen, *Mensch und Moral im Mittelalter: Geschichte und Fiktion in Hugo von Trimbergs (sic) “Der Renner”* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990), 75–91.

⁵ Ageism: *Stereotyping and Prejudice against Old Persons*, ed. Todd D. Nelson (Cambridge, MA, and London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2002).

⁶ For the most comprehensive coverage of this topic, see Christian Kiening, *Schwierige Modernität: Der ‘Ackermann’ des Johannes von Tepl und die Ambiguität historischen Wandels*. Münchener Texte und Untersuchungen zur deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters, 113 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1998), 334–36. Cf. also Gerhild Scholz Williams, *The Vision of Death: A Study of the “Memento mori”*; *Expressions in Some Latin, German, and French Didactic Texts of the 11th and 12th Centuries*. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 191 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1976); Alois M. Haas, *Todesbilder im Mittelalter: Fakten und Hinweise in der deutschen Literatur* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989); *Dansen met*

of the human body in its pure physicality which emits nothing but foul matter (23197–98), especially when old age sets in, which he describes in most drastic terms. Considering the *memento-mori* motif, however, this was rather a commonplace in the Middle Ages (23191–208).⁷ At the same time, Hugo did not hesitate to play the other register as well, praising old age as a worthy stage in life: “Guot rât, zuht und bescheidenheit / Alter liute krône treit” (16259–60; Good advice, discipline, and experience carry the crown of old people). The focus on the body, however, immediately evoked a panoply of negative images and sentiments, especially with respect to old women (23467–70).

Hugo was only one of many Middle High German poets who specifically addressed the topic of ‘old age,’ and we could pursue his monumental didactic treatise for many more thousands of verses in order to grasp his concept of human life in all its dialectical terms, especially in old age. Intriguingly, literary texts perhaps allow for more in-depth analysis of the meaning of old age in the Middle Ages because of the many options available to the poets who could freely draw from the wide variety of mental and social concepts characterizing their society, either challenging their audiences with critical perspectives, or offering new imaginary models and concepts within a narrative context. Fictional texts often reflect to a great extent the contradictory nature of basic attitudes to old people in impressive detail, among many other social groups, although modern research has up to now not delved into this topic in greater measure because the notion of ‘old age’ has so far been studied mostly from historical and philosophical perspectives, particularly concerning the three “ages of man.”⁸

Having embarked on our topic by examining Hugo’s statements, I will first briefly review the scholarship on Old Age Studies, before turning most of my attention to the highly varied perspectives toward old age expressed by the thirteenth-century Middle High German poet The Stricker. I will conclude with an outlook on some late-medieval German writers and their testimonies regarding old people’s role in life and their social functions.⁹ Of course, there are many more powerful illustrations of what old age meant for medieval German poets, but The

de Dood: *De dodendans in boek en prent*, ed. Leo Kerssemakers, Pim van Page and Piet Visser (Amsterdam: Nederlandse Vereniging van Antiquaren, 2000). See also the contribution to this volume by Juanita Feros Ruys.

⁷ Shulamit Shahar, “The Middle Ages and Renaissance,” *The Long History of Old Age*, ed. Pat Thane (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 71–111.

⁸ J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986). Of course, Burrow does not shy away from literary documents, such as Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and the *Lais* by Marie de France, but he investigates them primarily in light of ethical statements, tropes of old age, and religious doctrine.

⁹ For a more thorough discussion of Old Age Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Studies, see my introduction to this volume.

Stricker serves exceedingly well to comprehend the complex and diverse approaches to this topic common at least in the thirteenth century.¹⁰

Klaus Arnold outlined the various stages in the life of man as discussed by medieval philosophers and theologians, and refers only to one literary example, a lament poem about old age composed by Hugo of Orléans (d. before 1160).¹¹ Shulamit Shahar has offered a broad survey of the meaning of growing old in the Middle Ages from a historical perspective.¹² She discusses the phenomenon of old age in economic, social, medical, religious, political, and practical-institutional terms (taking care of old people), and so sheds important light on a highly complex topic. In particular, Shahar emphasizes, which does not really come as a surprise for us, that

the image of the old person was not unequivocal. The old man was believed to possess wisdom, an accumulated experience of life, cooler passions . . . , serenity and, though not as often as a child, the ability to see the unseen. At the same time, the old person was held to have feebler mental faculties and to tend to irascibility, melancholy, miserliness . . . , a complaining and grumbling disposition, cowardice, suspiciousness, despondency, shamelessness and a rejection of all things new¹³

Contrary to common perceptions today, people in the Middle Ages were regarded as truly old only when they reached the age of 60 or 70, despite the fairly low life expectancy and the high mortality rate among children. The latter severely distorted the statistics and made us believe that most people in the Middle Ages died at the age of 30 or 40. In fact, those who reached that age bracket could confidently expect to live for 30 or 40 more years.¹⁴ The notorious Plague, or Black Death, for instance, killed many more young people than old people,¹⁵ probably

¹⁰ See also my article "Der alte Mensch in den spätmittelalterlichen Mæren: Die Komplexität der Alterserfahrung im Spätmittelalter aus mentalitätsgeschichtlicher Sicht," forthcoming in *Alterskulturen des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Elisabeth Vavra.

¹¹ Klaus Arnold, "Lebensalter: Mittelalter," *Europäische Mentalitätsgeschichte: Hauptthemen in Einzeldarstellungen*, ed. Peter Dinzelbacher. Kröners Taschenausgabe, 469 (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1993), 216–22. Peter Dinzelbacher himself, in his recent *Europa im Hochmittelalter 1050–1250: Eine Kultur- und Mentalitätsgeschichte*. Kultur und Mentalität (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2003), 139, also mentions Hugo Primas along with Walther von der Vogelweide who is known to have composed an elegy on old age, but Dinzelbacher limits himself to a few comments on this topic. Johannes Grabmayer, *Europa im späten Mittelalter 1250–1500: Eine Kultur- und Mentalitätsgeschichte*. Kultur und Mentalität (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2004), 123–24, has even less to say about old age and reproduces several modern stereotypes regarding old people in the Middle Ages.

¹² Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: 'Winter clothes us in shadow and pain'*. Trans. from the Hebrew by Yael Lotan (1995; London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹³ Shahar, *Growing Old*, 70.

¹⁴ Shahar, "The Middle Ages and Renaissance," 71.

¹⁵ Joseph P. Byrne, *The Black Death*. Greenwood Guides to Historic Events of the Medieval World

because the latter had a better resistance due to an accumulated immune system, though many more factors have to be taken into account for a comprehensive understanding of age distribution in medieval society.¹⁶

The only truly remarkable difference in the approach to old age in the Middle Ages versus the modern times seems to be the relative absence of any retirement system and of any old-age pension plan, if we disregard monasteries and hospitals where rather beneficial living conditions often allowed their members to reach relatively high age levels.¹⁷ Old people, at least at specific times, in specific cultures, and at specific social class levels, enjoyed considerable respect because of their accumulated knowledge, if not wisdom, especially because of their life-long experience, but this also meant for many that they had to work to the very day of their own death.¹⁸ Otherwise, as Shahar underscores, "There have been few changes in the image of the old person and the attitude towards the aged. Beside the 'positive' image there was the 'negative' one, often accompanied by expressions of rejection . . . there were widespread stereotypes and some difficult expectations concerning the states of mind and conduct, as well as the expectation that the old man should withdraw to the margin."¹⁹

Several other historians have also dedicated their research to the theme of old age, providing additional information regarding old age as reflected in specific areas and time periods, such as Peter N. Stearns who has examined the treatment of old age in nineteenth- and twentieth-century France in a very broad, and so also somewhat superficial sweep.²⁰ The contributors to the conference proceedings edited by Michael M. Sheehan, CSB, examine the care and extension of old age in medieval medicine (Luke Demaitre), the respect paid to the old in medieval Jewish communities (Michael A. Signer), the problems of aged Carolingian rulers (Paul Edward Dutton), the relationship between age, property, and careers in medieval society (David Herlihy), medieval widows (Margaret Wade Labarge), and retirement in fifteenth-century England (Joel T. Rosenthal).²¹ Only Alicia K. Nitecki

(Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 2004), 58–62; see now *Pest: Die Geschichte eines Menschheitstraumas*, ed. Mischa Meier (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2005). For a detailed analysis of what the consequences of the Black Death meant for the relationship between the generations in the fourteenth century, see Marilyn Sandidge's contribution to this volume.

¹⁶ Shahar, "The Middle Ages and Renaissance," 79.

¹⁷ Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 98–113.

¹⁸ Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 171–72.

¹⁹ Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 172.

²⁰ Peter N. Stearns, *Old Age in European Society: The Case of France* (New York: Homes & Meier, 1976).

²¹ *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe: Selected Papers from the Annual Conference of the Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, held 25–26 February and 11–12 November 1983*, ed. Michael M. Sheehan, CSB. *Papers in Mediaeval Studies*, 11 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990).

also investigated the testimony of literary documents, but she limited herself mostly to the tales in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.²²

Overall, however, as this brief *Forschungsbericht* indicates, the study of old age from a historical perspective is still in its incipient stage.²³ By the same token, commonly formulated claims that "the voice of the old person is rarely heard in the Medieval sources,"²⁴ certainly require rebuttal, especially because medieval literature features numerous old people, whether they are highly respected or face ridicule, as we have already seen in the comments by Hugo von Trimberg. In fact, literary voices carry as much, if not even more, weight in the mental-historical investigation of old age as scientific, philosophical, religious, and medical accounts.²⁵ This has been recently demonstrated analogously by studies on anger in the Middle Ages,²⁶ which found highly explicit expression in literary documents, like virtually all human affections and emotions.

Whereas Christoph Cormeau, and after him Fritz Peter Knapp, examined the pragmatic function of the motif of old-age in Walther von der Vogelweide's poetry (fl. ca. 1200–1220),²⁷ Ute von Bloh analyzes various opinions regarding old age in relationship to courtly love singing and wooing in a number of twelfth- and

²² Alicia K. Nitecki, "Figures of Old Age in Fourteenth-Century English Literature," *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, 107–16.

²³ Peter Fleming, *Family and Household in Medieval England*. Social History in Perspective (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), also deals with widows and widowers, but old people as members of the large family do not really figure in his investigation. This seems to be almost typical for most modern studies on the medieval family, see, for instance, *Medieval Families: Perspectives on Marriage, Household, and Children*, ed. Carol Neel. Medieval Academy Reprints for Teaching (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2004); *Framing the Family: Narrative and Representation in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods*, ed. Rosalynn Voaden and Diane Wolfthal. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 280 (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005); see also my Introduction to this volume.

²⁴ Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 173.

²⁵ Frederic D. Zeman, "The Medieval Period (1096–1438)," *Roots of Modern Gerontology and Geriatrics: Frederic D. Zeman's "Medical History of Old Age" and Selected Studies by Other Writers*, ed. Gerald J. Gruman (New York: Arno Press, 1979), 783–91 (according to the pagination of the original publication, sometime between 1942 and 1950).

²⁶ For a mostly historical perspective, see *Anger's Past: The Social Uses of an Emotion in the Middle Ages*, ed. Barbara H. Rosenwein (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998); for a primarily literary-historical approach, see Albrecht Classen, "Anger and Anger Management in the Middle Ages: Mental-Historical Perspectives," forthcoming in *Mediaevistik*.

²⁷ Christoph Cormeau, "Minne und Alter. Beobachtungen zur pragmatischen Einbettung des Altersmotivs bei Walther von der Vogelweide," *Mittelalterbilder aus neuer Perspektive: Diskussionsanstöße zu amour courtois, Subjektivität in der Dichtung und Strategien des Erzählens. Kolloquium Würzburg 1984*, ed. Ernstpeter Ruhe and Rudolf Behrens. Beiträge zur romanischen Philologie des Mittelalters, XIV (Munich: , 1985), 147–65; Fritz Peter Knapp, "Ein schoenez bilde. Ethik und Ästhetik in Walthers 'Alterton'," *Poetica* 25 (1993): 70–80. See also Wolfgang Mohr, "Altersdichtung Walthers von der Vogelweide," *Sprachkunst* 4 (1971): 329–56, though he interpreted Walther's poems very much in an almost positivistic vein as autobiographical reflections.

thirteenth-century German *Minnesongs*.²⁸ Jan M. Ziolkowski offers a critical discussion of the topos of the old woman in classical and medieval literature,²⁹ while Timo Joutsivuo outlines the theme of gerontology in medieval medical literature.³⁰ We could also refer to brief investigations of the topos of old age in Spanish-Arabic literature,³¹ or to critical studies of the notion of time and old age in Chaucer's works.³² Nevertheless, old age, despite its considerable weight both in historical reality and in the world of poetic fiction, has not been adequately examined, although we have recently learned much about widows in the Middle Ages—but hardly anything about widowers.³³ This also applies to medieval German literature, a desideratum which this paper intends to address by focusing on some representative and less representative examples.

My main, though not only, witness here will be Der (The) Stricker, a thirteenth-century Middle High German poet who flourished between 1210 and 1250 and

²⁸ Ute von Bloh, "Zum Altersthema in Minneliedern des 12. und 13. Jahrhunderts: Der 'Einbruch' der Realität," *Walther von der Vogelweide: Beiträge zu Produktion, Edition und Rezeption*, ed. Thomas Bein. Walther-Studien, 1 (Frankfurt a. M., Bern, et al.: Peter Lang, 2002), 117–44. She observes, 143, that "Die Thematisierung des Alters oder des Alterns wird dabei zugleich zur Möglichkeitsbedingung für die Auseinandersetzung mit normsetzenden Ansprüchen, die das höfische Minnelied mitproduziert" (The thematization of old age or of growing old becomes a condition for the possible interaction with norm-setting claims which the courtly love song produces as well).

²⁹ Jan M. Ziolkowski, "Old Wives' Tales: Classicism and Anti-Classicism from Apuleius to Chaucer," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 12 (2002): 90–113; see also Heather M. Arden, "La vieille femme dans la littérature médiévale: sexualité et narrativité," *Europäische Literaturen im Mittelalter: Mélanges en l'honneur de Wolfgang Spiewok à l'occasion de son 65ème anniversaire*, ed. Danielle Buschinger. Greifswalder Beiträge zum Mittelalter, 15. (Greifswald: Reineke Verlag, 1994), 1–7.

³⁰ Timo Joutsivuo, "Vanhuus, välitila ja gerontologia lääketieteellisessä kirjallisuudessa myöhäiskeskiajalla ja renessanssissa," *Hippikrates* 13 (1996): 136–51.

³¹ Wilhelm Hoenerbach, "Zwei Studien zur spanisch-arabischen Literatur," *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 141, 2 (1991): 253–80.

³² Martin Camargo, "Time as Rhetorical Topos in Chaucer's Poetry," *Medieval Rhetoric: A Casebook*, ed. Scott D. Troyan. Routledge Medieval Casebooks (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 91–107; see also Charles Smith, "Chaucer's Reeve and St. Paul's Old Man," *Chaucer Review* 30, 1 (1995): 101–06.

³³ Widows, however, were not necessarily of old age. For extensive discussions of medieval widowhood, see *Upon My Husband's Death: Widows in the Literatures and Histories of Medieval Europe*, ed. Louise Mirrer. Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Civilization (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992); *Wife and Widow in Medieval England*, ed. Sue Sheridan Walker (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993); *Medieval London Widows 1300–1500*, ed. Caroline M. Barron and Anne F. Sutton (London and Rio Grande: The Hambledon Press, 1994); *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl. The New Middle Ages (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner. Women and Men in History (New York: Pearson Education, 1999); Albrecht Classen, Erhart Gross — ein weitgehend unbekannt gebliebener Autor des 15. Jahrhunderts. Über Liebe, Ehe, Kinder, Witwenschaft und Gottesfurcht aus der Sicht eines Kartäusers," *Journal of English and German Philology* 100 (2001): 377–405.

composed a most unusual Arthurian romance, *Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal* (*Daniel of the Blossoming Valley*), then a historicizing epic of Charlemagne (*Karl der Große*), and a collection of didactic-satirical narratives centering on the cunning priest Amîs; finally he also wrote a number of short verse narratives, including beast fables, prayers, didactic poems, and *mæren* (short entertaining verse narratives).³⁴

In *Daniel*, numerous magical events determine the outcome of the many struggles that the protagonist has to overcome, many of which involve women who need to be liberated. At the end, however, both Daniel and King Arthur, along with the other knights of the Round Table, engage in a massive battle against a hostile king and overcome his forces and kill him. During the festivities celebrating their victory, suddenly an old man appears who later turns out to be the father of two giants whom Daniel had previously killed in life-threatening struggles in order to clear the path for King Arthur to enter the enemy country and to meet his challenger.³⁵ One of these giants had functioned as King Matûr's messenger to King Arthur demanding from him to hand over his land and to submit himself under Matûr; the other had assumed the role of guardian, protecting Matûr's kingdom from outside enemies. Ultimately, however, both die at Daniel's hand, but only after he has won magical tools from ladies whom he had helped in their own misery, or from their oppressors.

The giants' father was a man of many skills, and had prepared his sons' skin in a way making it impenetrable to normal weapons.³⁶ Now, when all enemies seem to have been overcome and defeated, this Old Man—here capitalized because this is the name by which he is introduced—arrives at King Arthur's court, acting in a most gruff manner, beating everyone out of his way and placing himself in front of the king whom Gawein had pointed out to him. The narrator characterizes him

³⁴ For a comprehensive introduction and overview of the relevant research and the manuscript tradition, see Michael Resler, "Der Stricker," *German Writers and Works of the High Middle Ages: 1170–1280*, ed. James Hardin and Will Hasty. Dictionary of Literary Biography, 138 (Detroit, Washington, D.C., and London: Gale Research, 1994), 117–32; for a selection of English translations, see J. W. Thomas, *Fables, Sermonettes, and Parables by the Stricker, 13th Century German Poet*. Studies in German Language and Literature, 21 (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1999); for a most recent study on The Stricker's moralizing tales (*bispeln*), see Helmut Dworschak, *Milch und Acker. Körperliche und sexuelle Aspekte der religiösen Erfahrung. Am Beispiel der Bussdidaxe des Strickers*. Deutsche Literatur von den Anfängen bis 1700, 40 (Bern, Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 2003).

³⁵ For a plot summary and a critical evaluation of Stricker research, see Markus Wennerhold, *Späte mittelhochdeutsche Artusromane: 'Lanzelet', 'Wigalois', 'Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal', 'Diu Crône'. Bilanz der Forschung 1960–2000*. Würzburger Beiträge zur deutschen Philologie, 27 (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), 128–81.

³⁶ Der Stricker, *Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal*, ed. Michael Resler. Altdeutsche Textbibliothek, 92 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1983), vv. 761–87. See also his translation: Der Stricker, *Daniel of the Blossoming Valley (Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal)*, trans. Michael Resler. Garland Library of Medieval Literature, Series B, 58 (New York and London: Garland, 1990). Here I use my own translation.

as “ein vil wunderlich man” (6905; a very strange man) who wears nothing but a silken tunic and something like silken leggings or breeches and is clearly marked as a person of old age by his white hair (6913). But in physical strength he seems to have no match since everyone flees from him (6921–22). One of his sons has already introduced him at the beginning when he had transmitted King Matür’s message to Arthur. The Old Man knows how to create mechanical works of wondrous nature (738–61),³⁷ and the skin of horn on the giant’s body is also his work (76870).

Although he has reached the age of hundred years—a veritable Methuselah (Gen. 5:21–27)—he would be able to run faster than all animals and birds (773–77). Moreover, as the giant reports, despite his small size compared to him, the Old Man commands more strength and would also have much knowledge of the occult arts (780–82). A number of scholars have tried to interpret this “Riesenvater-episode” (the episode with the father of the two giants), but despite all attempts by Stephen Wailes, Hedda Ragotzky, Walter Haug, Ingeborg Henderson, Helmut Brall, and Wolfgang W. Moelleken to consider its function as entertainment or comical intermezzo, as a deliberate retardation, as a strategy to praise Daniel’s intellectual approach to all challenges, or to refocus the entire romance on the innovative narrative aspects introduced by The Stricker, no convincing explanation has yet been offered.³⁸

Structural elements indicate a remarkable inversion of some of the fundamental features of all Arthurian romances, but this would not explain why the poet introduced the figure of an old man who almost destroys the entire courtly world

³⁷ For a study on mechanical wonders as reported in medieval fictional narratives, see Lambertus Okken, *Das Goldene Haus und die golden Laube: Wie die Poesie ihren Herren das Paradies einrichtete*. Amsterdamer Publikationen zur Sprache und Literatur, 72 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987). He also refers to the medieval myth of the Old Man of the Mountain, as reported in the travelogues by Odoric of Pordenone and Marco Polo, 160–63, and it might even be possible that The Stricker had already heard of this myth considerably earlier than these two writers. Since the Order of the Assassins had been founded in the late twelfth century, certainly some crusaders could have related some news of their existence to the west. See Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Secret Order of Assassins: The Struggle of the Early Nizārī Ismāʿīlīs Against the Islamic World* (1955; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 72–77. Another possibility might be that The Stricker drew from ancient folklore concerning a wise old smith living and working in the mountains, see Lotte Motz, *The Wise One of the Mountain: Form, Function, and Significance of the Subterranean Smith: A Study in Folklore*. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 379 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1983).

³⁸ Wolfgang W. Moelleken, “Die Bedeutung der Riesenvaterepisode in Strickers ‘Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal’,” *Spectrum Medii Aevi: Essays in Early German Literature in Honor of George Fenwick Jones*, ed. William C. McDonald. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1983), 347–59, offers a good summary of the various arguments, but he does not develop any new perspective either. See also Markus Wennerhold, *Späte mittelhochdeutsche Artusromane*, 158–60. For a broader treatment of *Daniel*, see Ingeborg Henderson, *Strickers Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal: Werkstruktur und Interpretation unter Berücksichtigung der handschriftlichen Überlieferung*. German Language and Literature Monographs, 1 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1976).

in revenge for the death of his two sons, whether they were mechanical creatures or living beings.³⁹ For our purposes, however, we can focus on the fact that The Stricker integrated an old man as a most formidable opponent of the protagonist, not to speak of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table who all fail miserably both at the appearance of the giant and in this situation with the old man.⁴⁰ More specifically, the poet utilizes the figure of an old man who defies all possible definitions of a person at that stage in his life, thereby deeply challenging us in our notion of what old age really might have meant for him and his contemporaries.⁴¹

Almost in anticipation of the arrival of the Green Knight at King Arthur's court in the anonymous Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (late fourteenth century),⁴² the Old Man offers to present a game to the company: "ich wil iuch ein spil lâzen sehen" (6935; I want to let you observe a game), which also finds a parallel in the Green Knight's speech.⁴³ No one has ever seen such a game, he pronounces (6939–40), and he asks everyone to make room. But instead of fulfilling his promise, he tricks them all and kidnaps King Arthur, grabbing him and carrying him so quickly away that no one can follow him and rescue the king. Despite his old age, he demonstrates enormous physical skills and knows, as the narrator emphasizes as well, more of occult arts than all people on the earth (6989–91). The knights hope, however, to catch him in front of the mountains, but to their great dismay they have to realize that the Old Man is capable of climbing any rocks and so he carries the king with him, placing him on the top of the mountains where no one would be able to rescue him, exposing him to his certain death. The Old Man's dexterity in climbing would outdo any monkey (7016–17).

Only then does the Old Man announce to those left behind at the foot of the mountain the reasons for the kidnapping. He was the father of the two giants whom Daniel had killed, and now he is trying to avenge their death (7054–56).

³⁹ Even most recent attempts to deal with this episode have not yielded a true breakthrough, see, for instance, Hans-Jürgen Scheuer, "Bildintensität: Eine imaginationstheoretische Lektüre des Strickerschen Artusromans 'Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal,'" *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 124, 1 (2005): 23–46.

⁴⁰ Albrecht Classen, "The Role of Women in the Stricker's Courtly Romance 'Daniel von dem blühenden Tal,'" *Women as Protagonists and Poets in the German Middle Ages: An Anthology of Feminist Approaches to Middle High German Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 528 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1991), 87–103; here 89–93.

⁴¹ See also my comments on old Hildebrand in the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* and on old Beowulf in the Introduction to this volume.

⁴² *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. A Dual Language Version, ed. and trans. by William Vantuono. Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, 1265 (New York and London: Garland, Garland, 1991), 136ff.

⁴³ V. 273: "Þou wyl grant me godly þe gomen þat I ask, / bi ryȝt." Significantly, the Green Knight also wears no armor (290).

When the members of Arthur's retinue try to shoot him with their arrows, Daniel intervenes and pleads with them to stop because if they were to kill him, Arthur would never be able to come down the mountain again (7071–78). But next the Old Man challenges them once again to a duel, and this allows him to capture Parzival, whom he also places on a mountain top, unreachable for anyone (7195–215).

In this emergency Daniel suddenly remembers the magic net which one of the ladies in the Land of the Green Meadow whom he had helped before holds in her possession. He quickly rides to her and begs for her assistance, which she then does, and indeed they subsequently manage to catch the Old Man in this invisible net from which no one can free himself without outside help. Approaching their prisoner, Daniel at first threatens him with the death penalty for all his evil deeds, but when he realizes that the Old Man does not care about preserving his life, having already lost both of his giant sons, he resorts to another strategy. Daniel reminds him that one stupid sentence could ruin a man's reputation even if he had spoken only intelligently for twenty-four days (7654–61). Having sent one of his sons to King Arthur on behalf of King Matûr was, however, an extraordinary stupidity, especially because the giant had threatened Arthur with death if he were not to comply with the demands to submit under King Matûr, a reflection of his "übermuote" (7676; hubris). Offering resistance at that time would have meant their own death, particularly because of the giant's invulnerability (7695). Killing this giant, and later his brother, which Daniel managed to do by means of magical tools, represented nothing but self-defense ("nôtwere;" 7715) and had been approved by God (7724).

Surprisingly, the Old Man immediately accepts these arguments and explanations. If his sons indeed had embraced improper behavior, they would have deserved their punishments; but he himself had not been involved at all, so he clearly distances himself from his foolish, and by now dead sons (7734–59). In fact, he declares that he would put his wrath to rest because he fully understands Daniel's motivations and listens to his arguments with full attention, finally accepting his words as meaningful and justified. We might also say that the Old Man embraces Daniel's offer to enter a meaningful communication and to pay attention to the other's arguments (7745–53). He asks for peace and then even begs the protagonist to accept him as his servant (7777–82).⁴⁴ Subsequently, the entire conflictual situation is solved, and the Old Man returns his two captives and receives, as his reward, both the magical net and the salve that makes it possible for him to see it.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ See Johanna Reisel, *Zeitgeschichtliches und theologisch-scholastische Aspekte im "Daniel von dem blühenden Tal" des Stricker*. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 464 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1986), 143–46, though she does not comment on the Old Man's old age.

⁴⁵ Ingeborg Henderson, *Strickers Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal*, 183–84, suggests that the entire episode illustrates once again the preponderance of *list* (intelligent response to a challenge) over *craft*

Once happiness and courtliness have been reestablished, King Arthur accepts the Old Man as his friend and advisor and offers him a reward according to his liking. Again, however, the Old Man refuses to be integrated into the traditional role of a courtier or a member of the Round Table. Rejecting the monetary offer, he only requests to be enfeoffed with a secret land behind almost insurmountable mountains from where no living creature can escape except for himself because of his extraordinary skills: "wan daz ich sô künstic bin" (8374)—which might be additional evidence, though not pertinent to our argument here, that The Stricker might somehow have been familiar with the myth of the Old Man of the Mountains in northern Persia, the founder of the Assassins, a possibility which also applies to his near contemporary Wirnt von Grafenberg, composer of the Arthurian romance *Wigalois*.⁴⁶

Arthur, in his typical generosity and friendliness, immediately concedes this secluded land to him, and even makes him a free man ruling over this remote country by himself because he would rather own an egg than two such rugged and inaccessible countries (8391–95). The Old Man demonstrates deep gratitude and salutes the king, which is the last time we hear of him. After all, he is not an indigenous member of the courtly world, and his disappearance behind the inaccessible mountains only reconfirms the openness and permeability (in pragmatic and cultural terms) of King Arthur's court.⁴⁷

The Stricker can be credited for having incorporated this scene as a most unique narrative element within the tradition of Arthurian romances. Considering our particular topic, we learn several important aspects regarding the evaluation of old age. If this Old Man might be representative in any way, his appearance clearly signals that old people are not simply to be regarded as weak, imbecile, helpless, or frail. As this Old Man demonstrates, he commands more physical and intellectual strengths than almost everyone at King Arthur's court.⁴⁸ Certainly,

(physical strength).

⁴⁶ Wirnt von Grafenberg, *Wigalois*. Text der Ausgabe von J. M. N. Kapteyn, übersetzt, erläutert und mit einem Nachwort versehen von Sabine Seelbach und Ulrich Seelbach (Berlin und New York: de Gruyter, 2005), 10380–88. For the mythical history of this Old Man, see Lotte Baumann, "Der Alte vom Berg," *Enzyklopädie des Märchens*, ed. Kurt Ranke. Vol. 1 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1977), 350–53.

⁴⁷ Despite some dubious theoretical speculations, Bettina Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood*. Religion and Culture in the Middle Ages (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), 153, offers interesting perspectives regarding the relationship between the individual and the social group: "This permeability even at the end confirms that the court can never be permanently and safely enclosed." She does not, however, even comment on the age of this mysterious old man.

⁴⁸ The situation with the Green Knight proves to be more complex since he is once described as "olde": "þe olde lorde of þat leude" (1124), but, as J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 174–75, underscores, otherwise he clearly appears as a man in his middle age and "as the knight householder" (Burrow, 174).

Daniel ultimately knows how to trick him into the magical net, and in a way he catches him with the help of his "own" weapons, setting magic against magic. But more important, old age here does not emerge as the final and most miserable stage in life. This Old Man commands more physical powers than everyone else at court. He also possesses profound knowledge of many different things, whether it concerns the creation of impenetrable skin or other magical arts ("listen," 7598). But he does not want to live in human society and prefers to withdraw into his secretive mountain kingdom where he is the master of all. But this Old Man also could have turned into a highly prized advisor of King Arthur, as he used to be for King Matûr, except that now with the loss of his two giant sons he prefers to live by himself. But even in this respect we can observe that The Stricker paid considerable respect to old age as the right time to serve as a king's advisor, which all didactic and political writers in the Middle Ages would have confirmed.⁴⁹

King Matûr would never have met his own downfall and death if he had listened to the Old Man's council (8363–64). But The Stricker does not necessarily idealize this Old Man who was caught in his own illusions regarding his lord in his ill intentions regarding King Arthur, and who did not even know of the improper behavior of his two giant sons. In fact, the young Daniel ultimately catches the Old Man because he intelligently conceives of a plan to use the proper instrument (the invisible net) in this struggle against a man who knows many occult arts and proves to be physically stronger than all of them in King Arthur's entourage. Not surprisingly, at the end the Old Man withdraws into the nebulous country behind the steep mountains and so disappears from our sight. But this Old Man certainly intrigues everyone at court, and as well as the audience, because of his mystical character and otherworldliness.⁵⁰

He is neither a truly evil character nor willing to join the ranks of Arthur's knights, and he does not enter Daniel's service either, although the latter had captured him and had explained to him his misconception of why his two sons had to die at his hands. To be sure, this Old Man defies all traditional notions of people in their old age and demonstrates that age by itself has no absolute

⁴⁹ Joseph M. Sullivan, *Counsel in Middle High German Arthurian Romance*. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 690 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 2001), 8–30. He cites, for instance, 21, Vincent of Beauvais's mirror of princes, the *De morali principis institutione* (ca. 1264): "Mature men should be chosen [as counselors], not hasty and impetuous men." Similarly ninth-century Alcuin also had voiced the same opinion: "Make use of the counsel of old men and the physical service of young men." See also Rosemarie Deist, *Gender and Power: Counsellors and Their Masters in Antiquity and Medieval Courtly Romance*. Beiträge zur älteren Literaturgeschichte (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2003), 175–95.

⁵⁰ Recent research has devoted itself much to the topic of 'Otherness' in medieval and early-modern literature and culture, but the sub-category of 'old age' as 'other' has not yet been observed, see, for example, Dorothy Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

meaning in the evaluation of skills, knowledge, experience, and abilities to cope in the world of knighthood, the arts, warfare, the occult sciences, and physical prowess.

In his *Karl der Große* (Charlemagne), an extensive and highly popular historicizing romance (after 1220; (twenty-four manuscripts and twenty-one fragments), created in close parallel to, or based on, Priest Konrad's *Rolandslied* from ca. 1170 and other sources, The Stricker introduces several old people, one serving under the Muslim ruler Marsilies, Charlemagne's true nemesis. The old and wise Blanschandiez, described in highly positive terms at least within his own cultural context, develops a sophisticated strategy for his ruler to defeat the Christian opponent through deception and skillful diplomacy.

Although at the end the Muslims will have to learn that nothing can help them against this mighty Christian ruler, and that they are foolish in trying to apply such a devious plan, here we are only interested in the presentation of the old man. As the narrator describes him, he is "... alt unde grâ, / und was der wîseste dâ" (he was old and grey and was the wisest of them all. He was regarded as a worthy man at court).⁵¹ If anyone could come up with a cunning concept, it would have been him (1004–05), which might be reflected in the way how his beard has been braided (1006), obviously as a sign of honor and respect enjoyed by the old.⁵² As the narrator emphasizes, both his social status and his wealth entitle him to speak his mind freely (1007–09). Hardly has he raised his voice, when the entire court pays attention to him and pledges that they would make available to him everything they own, including their lives, their honor, and their land (1018).

Considering the Saracens' plight, Blanschandiez offers an amazingly detailed, intricate, and also promising plan that demonstrates vast experience in military warfare, diplomacy, and political psychology. This old man fully understands that

⁵¹ *Karl der Grosse von dem Stricker*, ed. Karl Bartsch. With an epilogue by Dieter Kartschoke. Deutsche Neudrucke. Reihe: Texte des Mittelalters (1857; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1965), 1001–03. For source studies and interpretations, see Udo von der Burg, *Strickers Karl der Grosse als Bearbeitung des Rolandsliedes: Studien zu Form und Inhalt*. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 131 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1974); Dorothea Klein, "Strickers 'Karl der Große' oder die Rückkehr zur geistlichen Verbindlichkeit," *Wolfram-Studien XV. Neue Wege der Mittelalter-Philologie: Landshuter Kolloquium 1996*, ed. Joachim Heinzle, L. Peter Johnson, and Gisela Vollmann-Profe (Berlin: Schmidt, 1998), 299–323; Elke Ukena-Best, "Du solt ouch hin ze Spanje varn: got wil dich dâ mit ëren: Providentia Dei, Herrschertum und poetische Konzeption im 'Karl' des Stricker mit Blick auf das althochdeutsche 'Ludwigslid'," *Leuvense Bijdragen* 89 (2001): 327–62.

⁵² Joachim Bumke, *Höfische Kultur: Literatur und Gesellschaft im hohen Mittelalter*. Vol. 1 (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, 1986), 201–03. The fourteenth-century Viennese poet discusses the use and abuse of long beards in his stanza "Vom har und lanngen paerten" (no. 612), *Die Gedichte Heinrichs des Teichners*. Vol. III (*Gedichte Nr. 537–729*). Deutsche Texte des Mittelalters, XLVIII (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1956), 171–73.

they do not have sufficient resources to resist Charlemagne, so he advises them to appease the Frankish ruler with everything available to them, and to wait for the moment when Charlemagne would have returned to the Rhine (Aachen), leaving behind only a small troop of his most trusted soldiers to guard the country. When the time would have arrived at which Charlemagne would have dispatched his armies to different fronts, leaving no major military force at hand, the Saracens should apprehend the Christians and use them as hostages whom they could exchange for their own hostages in Charlemagne's control (1127–45).

Considering the Saracens' perspective, that is, their deep-seated hostility against the Christians, and their fear of the mighty enemy, moreover, considering their love for their own land and their passionate desire to rid themselves of this dangerous opponent, the old man has indeed come up with a formidable plan to achieve all these goals over time without direct military confrontation: "*sô gemache wir in der zît / unser lant alsô veste, / daz wir die leiden geste / niemer niht entsitzen. / mit susgetânen witzen / sul wir in vertriben / und wir mit êren blîben*" (1140–46; then we will fortify our country in time so well that we can defeat the unwelcome guests. With this strategy we will expel them and gain honor).

Of course, from a Christian perspective, this old man should be condemned for suggesting such an approach, which would ultimately hurt the Christian side. Nevertheless, Charlemagne triumphs at the end anyway with the help of God, but our interest here is limited to the projection of an old man as such, who appears as wise, respected, vested with tremendous authority, intelligent, and insightful. Consequently, which is not surprising, everyone at Marsilies's court acknowledges his authority and embraces his suggestion on how to handle the Christian threat.

Significantly, however, Blanschandiez meets his match in an equally old and wise man at Charlemagne's court, Bishop Johan, highly respected for his experience and knowledge. The narrator emphasizes that his old age has made him so weak in physical terms that he can hardly speak anymore (1822), but everyone recognizes in him a leader of their people because of his wisdom and intelligence: "*und offenlîche jâhen, / er wære der alre beste, / den man iender lebende weste, / swie kranc er wære unt swie alt*" (1828–31; and said publicly that he was the best of them all at their time, however weak and old he was). In fact, as the narrator adds, he was "*starc küen unde balt*" (1832; he was strong, courageous, and bold). The weakness of his body, though, is not the result of his old age, as we are told, but a consequence of overly strenuous fasting, praying, waking, and kneeling in church (1838–41). He requires a crutch to lean on (1847), but he still knows how to address the emperor and the court in a forceful and impressive manner (1848ff.). Charlemagne encourages him, again out of great respect, to sit down and not to torture himself, but Johan insists on standing, "*wan ich gotes êre sprechen sol*" (1864; because I must announce the glory of God).

Significantly, whereas all other members of the royal council encouraged Charlemagne to accept the peace offer by the Saracen ruler, Bishop Johan is radically opposed: "ir sult in doch gelouben niht, / irn seht der rehten wârheit iht: / si hânt uns ouch betrogen ê, / wir fürhten dâz nu sam ergê" (1875–78; you should not trust them, you do not perceive the whole truth: they have deceived us before, we are afraid that it will happen again). Indeed, as the previous deliberations among the Saracens have already confirmed, and as the future events will do so as well, this old man fully understands how to see through the opponents' deceptions and so gives truly trustworthy advice to the emperor, though even he will not be able to prevent the future catastrophe of Genelun's betrayal and Roland's death.

Old age, however, does not prove to be the guarantee for wisdom and a good Christian conviction. Blanschandiez and Johan enter a battle of wits and rhetorics, the first being identified as an evil source of deception and cunning, whereas the latter serves as Charlemagne's most reliable and experienced advisor who explicitly opposes the Saracen's strategy. But his understanding and intelligence are not necessarily predicated on his old age, instead rather on his true conviction as a devout Christian—an aspect completely missing in Blanschandiez, although he operates with greatest skills and energy, practically directing the entire court of Marsilies, determining the course of plan to defeat Charlemagne through a secret strategy, such as when the Saracen ruler asks him for his input: "wie rætestu danne daz ich tuo?" (2684; what do you advise that I should do?).

Altogether, in The Stricker's *Karl der Große* two mighty old men figure prominently who deeply influence the political, military, and religious decision-making process. Despite the negative evaluation of the old Saracen, the narrator still indicates the influence which Blanschandiez exerts, very similar, if not parallel, to that of Bishop Johan at Charlemagne's court. Of course, neither of these two men is involved in any of the actual battles, but they have direct access to the respective rulers and enjoy the highest respect at the courts because of their wisdom, intelligence, and foresightedness. In a way, we might say that not even Blanschandiez demonstrates an evil character because he is making every effort to protect his ruler, his country, and the other nobles at Marsilies's court. Only Genelun, Roland's step-father, emerges as a truly evil character, determined by his cowardice, greed, jealousy, small-mindedness, and lack of ethics and virtues.⁵³ By contrast, both old men, each at least in his respective cultural context, prove to be

⁵³ Helmut Brall, "Genelun und Willehalm: Aspekte einer Funktionsgeschichte der mittelhochdeutschen Chanson de Geste-Dichtung," *Literatur und Sprache im historischen Prozeß*, ed. Thomas Cramer (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1983), 400–17; Werner Hoffmann, "Genelun, der Verrätaere," *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 120.3 (2001): 345–60.

the very opposite and enjoy highest respect, which places them, so to speak, at the center of the entire courtly society.

John of Salisbury, writing only a few decades before *The Stricker*, already had emphasized the great value to be placed on old people within a society. Citing Lysurgus, he underscores that "the elderly should have the greatest honours on account of the status of their age; certainly in no other place on earth did the elderly have such great honour."⁵⁴ Drawing extensively from the Old Testament, John confirmed: "'Old Age is neither venerable according to its days nor computed in numerical years.' 'Grey hair is the glory of the old.' 'Grey hairs are a man's judgment, the advancement of age is an unblemished life.'" For him, all these statements imply: "Entirely blessed is one who embraces old age in this way, so that by the testimony of his own conscience he may rejoice in his blameless life."⁵⁵

What matters, then, at least for our specific topic here, is the great respect which, at least according to *The Stricker* and also according to John of Salisbury, the old advisors enjoy, both in the Saracen and in the Christian camps. Moreover, both develop strategies of utmost intelligence, though ultimately the Saracens will fail, undoubtedly fully in line with the Christian orientation upon which *The Stricker's Karl der Große* is predicated, and this in turn very much in conformity with practically every other text composed by countless other medieval Christian authors, dealing with the conflicts between these two world religions.⁵⁶

In one of his many short verse narratives, *The Stricker* pursues the theme of 'old age' further, but from a very different perspective and with different didactic purposes. In "Der junge Ratgeber" (XV; *The Young Counselor*), we actually hear how a young man assumes the role of the king's counselor after his father has passed away, who had been the king's previous counselor.⁵⁷ At first, however, we learn in detail what characterizes the old counselor, who holds the rank of a duke (3) and owns many lands and castles, and rules over many people (4), all of which

⁵⁴ John of Salisbury, *Policraticus: Of the Frivolities of Courtiers and the Footprints of Philosophers*, ed. and trans. Cary J. Nederman (Cambridge, New York, et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 34.

⁵⁵ John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, 83–84.

⁵⁶ For further investigations of this topic, see, for instance, *Medieval Christian Perceptions of Islam: A Book of Essays*, ed. John Victor Tolan. Garland Medieval Casebooks (New York and London: Garland, 1996); *La chrétienté au péril sarrasin: Actes du colloque de la section française de la société internationale Rencesvals (Aix-en-Provence, 30 septembre - 1er octobre 1999)*. Seneffiance, 46 (Aix-en-Provence: CUER MA Université de Provence, 2000).

⁵⁷ *Der Stricker, Verserzählungen*, II. Mit einem Anhang: *Der Weinschweig*, ed. Hanns Fischer. 2nd rev. ed. Johannes Janota. Altdeutsche Textbibliothek, 68 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1977), 12–30; for a study of possible sources, see Klaus Grubmüller, *Die Ordnung, der Witz und das Chaos: Eine Geschichte der europäischen Novellistik im Mittelalter: Fabliau – Märe – Novelle* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2006), 85, 94–95, 97, 101–04.

he had acquired from the king as reward for his loyal services: "ez nam der küninc vür ein heil / daz er sîn genôz sô sêre" (6–7; the king considered it a blessing that he could rely on him so well). As the narrator comments, this honorable man was lacking nothing for his complete happiness but his youth (10–11), but there is no sense of lament or complaint about his old age, neither on the side of the king nor on his own.

Whatever the king entrusted to him was in good hands (16–19), but one day the counselor reaches the end of his life and asks his lord to come to his bed. Taking stock of the king's property, he emphasizes that it comprises considerably more now than the latter would even assume (32). Facing death, the old man only expresses two concerns, or a sense of regret, first, that he will no longer see his beloved king, and second, that he will leave behind his own young son. In order to safeguard a safe transition from his service as counselor to another person, he urges the king to appoint a man of wisdom (59), implying another old man with much life experience. But the king insists that the only trustworthy replacement would be the old man's son who would continue with his father's virtues, despite the latter's explicit concerns that the young man might not be able to sustain the pressures of this office and could then easily lose the king's favor: "'swenne er dâ mit niht enkan, / sô gemachet er mit schulden, / daz er kumt von iuvern hulden" (70–72; when he cannot handle it he will do something which will put him into your disgrace). But the king is not swayed by these fears and indeed appoints the young man as his counselor after his father has passed away.

However, as anticipated by the old man, problems soon emerge because a devastating famine affects the entire country, requiring an energetic and highly circumspect approach which, as it seems, only the experience of a long life could produce. The situation proves to be so catastrophic that many of the nobles threaten to leave the country and to abandon the king, but the young counselor opens the king's storage and provides them all with sufficient food. The second year, the famine gets even worse, and this time the young counselor resorts to the king's treasures, which alleviate the famine once again. In the third year, everything turns back to normal, and everyone says that they have never seen a better harvest. However, now the envious and jealous courtiers begin to sabotage against the young man and try to malign him with the king, accusing him of having misappropriated all of his wealth and properties. Called to the court to defend himself, the young counselor refers to his own father's words with which he had warned the king that his son would not know how to cope with so much of the king's wealth. In his naivete, as he confesses, in the years of famine he had handed it out to everyone who needed it because it would have been better to keep the nobles in the country and to feed them than to preserve all the goods but to lose all the best people (226–29). Ultimately, a country without people would be worth nothing: "daz lant ist âne liute enwiht" (247), and the king would not

have been able to overcome the humiliation and dishonor if all his nobles would have died from the famine (248–51).

Nevertheless, the young man admits being a fool and not understanding the proper way of administering a country: “herre, ich bin ein tumber” (258; Sir, I am a fool). Contrary to his expectations, however, the king entirely turns around and praises him fully for his wise decisions and actions, and anticipates that he would even grow further in wisdom over time: “du wirst noch wiser, solt du leben” (273). Those who had accused him of having misappropriated the king’s properties now face his deep distrust and sharp rejection because the young man confirmed all the expectations that the king had placed in him. But it would be erroneous to read this narrative as an idealization of the young over the old. On the contrary, The Stricker here projects a rather mixed perspective of what good counselors are, and rejects age-specific criteria as the ultimate panacea for rulers in the selection of whom they can trust.⁵⁸

Both father and son emerge as ideal characters, irrespective of their age. Both demonstrate a high level of virtuosity and ethics, always acting in good trust to the advantage of their lord and the people, not corruptible and always trustworthy, fighting for the common wealth and the improvement of the lord’s power and his people’s lot. Old age, for sure, does not prove to be worse or better, instead the character and value system of a person emerge as the decisive criteria in the evaluation of an individual. Exactly like in *Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal*, young and old meet in the challenges of wit and ethics. Here, the son demonstrates to be a praiseworthy successor to his father, meeting, if not exceeding, the same criteria of honor, loyalty, wisdom, and maturity. In *Daniel*, on the other hand, the protagonist and the Old Man of the Mountain indirectly clash with each other throughout the entire romance, though the Old Man appears on the narrative stage only at the very end. But the two giants, products of the old man’s ingeniousness and knowledge of occult arts, had challenged Daniel from the start, almost defeating even him because of their superior physical power. Surprisingly, however, Daniel’s strategy with the magical net does not necessarily demonstrate his superiority over the old man because it is not his own creation. On the contrary, he wins the day, so to speak, because he acknowledges the old man as an equal in his communicative strategy and succeeds in convincing him of the justification of his previous actions against the two giants.

Consequently, the Old Man turns into an ally both of King Arthur and Daniel, though he subsequently withdraws into the mysterious kingdom behind the insurmountable mountains. In the verse narrative, the old father is identified as being as intelligent and prudent as his young son, and despite the father’s warning shortly before his death, the king’s decision to bestow the son with the honor of

⁵⁸ Joseph M. Sullivan, *Counsel in Middle High German Arthurian Romance*, 123–26.

serving as his counselor proves to be correct. Old age was not, at least in The Stricker's world, a time of physical and mental decline, although wisdom, honor, and reputation were not limited to the old people either, as the young counselor demonstrated through his highly admirable behavior, which protected both the king's people and safeguarded the king's honor and reputation, but which was also closely modeled after his old father's example.

In fact, as one of The Stricker's fables indicates, old age did not prevent people from foolishness, maliciousness, and even murderous callousness.⁵⁹ In "Der Wolf und sein Sohn" (VI; The Wolf and His Son), an old wolf convinces his son that he would like to repent for his many sins in his life, especially his crimes against poor people, hoping thereby to save his soul from eternal condemnation (13–14). The young wolf immediately accepts his father's statement at face value and promises to follow his model because he respects him in his old age (28–29). But only a short time later, about noon, they espy an ass near a lake, and the hypocritical father shamelessly identifies him as a huge crab sent to them by God Himself as a reward for their pledge to refrain from eating meat (50–54). Soon enough, however, after they have devoured the poor beast, people notice them and chase after them with their dogs. While they are running away, the father addresses his son, pretending that he would realize only now that they mistook an ass for a crab (85–89). The son confirms this, but he also underlines that he could have told him that right away, except that he had respected his authority based on his age and his role as father: "'wan daz din witze grøezer sint / und ich dir wol gelouben sol!" (92–92). Only as an afterthought, the son also remarks that he would have clearly recognized a crab which never would have the size of an ass (94–95), which signals a subtle but unmistakable criticism of his father in his pretense of being a rueful penitent. Nevertheless, the son had also enjoyed the meat of the ass, and had happily joined the game of deception initiated by his father because he profited from it as well.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ For a comprehensive interpretation of The Stricker's short verse narratives, see Stephen L. Wailes, *Studien zur Kleindichtung des Stricker*. Philologische Studien und Quellen, 104 (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1981). Unfortunately, he does not discuss the one tale that interests us here. But see Daniel Rocher, "Vom Wolf in den Fabeln des Strickers," *Third International Beast Epic, Fable and Fabliau Colloquium, Münster 1979: Proceedings*, ed. Jan Goossens and Timothy Sodmann. Niederdeutsche Studien, 30 (Cologne: Böhlau, 1981), 330–39; most recently, Emilio González, "Die Figur des lupus poenitens im Tierbispiel 'Der Wolf und sein Sohn'," *Die Kleinelik des Strickers: Texte, Gattungstraditionen und Interpretationsprobleme*, ed. id. and Victor Millet. Philologische Studien und Quellen, 199 (Berlin: Schmidt, 2006), 155–72, argues that the hypocritical wolf represents a satirical figure warning the audience not to undermine the fundamental Christian values of confession, penance, and absolution. This is the very obvious reading of this *bispiel*, whereas the mental-historical approach, here the focus on old age, takes us considerably deeper into the text's message.

⁶⁰ This narrative has hardly attracted any interest in modern scholarship, but see the few comments by Hans-Joachim Ziegeler, *Erzählen im Spätmittelalter: Mären im Kontext von Minnereden, Bispeln und*

Next the father asks his son to look back and to report to him what he sees of the dogs pursuing them. Two of those, flying ahead of the pack, making no noise, only eager to catch the wolves, are, as the father quickly realizes, greyhounds from which they would not be able to escape: "die zwene die sint unser tot" (125). Seemingly consigned to his destiny, and speaking the typical words of a father who is willing to give everything to protect his child, the old wolf encourages his son to run ahead and to escape, whereas he, in his old age and lack of health, would not be able to survive anyway (130). He only asks his son to kiss him one more time before he would save his life (132–33). He even begs him to pray to the Lord for his soul (137), continuing with his air of a pretense penitent. In reality, however, the old wolf employs a dirty trick and cruelly bites his own son through his neck (142–45). Leaving the almost lifeless body behind, abandoning it to the greyhounds, the father manages to escape to the woods, whereas the dogs fall over the young wolf and bite him to death (149–52). The narrator concludes his fable with the dry comments: "swie liep im der sun was, / do ez im gie an die not, / do verklagt er lihte sinen tot" (156–58; however much he loved his son, when he faced death, he cared little about his [son's] death).

In his epimythion The Stricker warns his audience of all those people who have the same value system as this wolf (159–60). Trusting a person like this father would be suicidal because no family bonds would be strong enough to overcome the father's absolute selfishness and instinct of survival at all costs (164–67). People like this wolf would not know of any loyalty (176–77) and would, in an emergency, simply kill even the best friend.

Certainly, here we face a rather complex situation which does not specifically and exclusively address the issue of old age. More generally, The Stricker addresses basic moral and ethical concerns and warns his audience of trusting the wrong people. Nevertheless, this fable is predicated on the relationship between the old father and the young son. The latter simply follows his father's advice and accepts everything he says because of his paternal and generational authority. As long as this allows him to profit from the situation, the relationship functions well, but as soon as a crisis emerges, the older wolf turns even against his young son and abandons him to his enemies.

We could not justifiably and confidently conclude that The Stricker naively identified all old people with the father wolf, and all young people with the son wolf. Yet, he did not hesitate to present this kind of relationship and deliberately shed negative light on old people who pursue purely egoistical goals. At the same

Romanen. Münchener Texte und Untersuchungen zur deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters, 87 (Munich: Artemis, 1985), 142. Now see also Klaus Grubmüller, *Die Ordnung, der Witz und das Chaos: Eine Geschichte der europäischen Novelle im Mittelalter: Fabliau – Märe – Novelle* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2006), 79–105. Because of the difference in genres, our fable is, of course, not mentioned by Grubmüller, whereas he discusses "Der junge Ratgeber," (101–04).

time, the fable also casts some criticism on the son because he did not hesitate to accept as truth whatever his father had told him about the ass, and enjoyed the meal although he knew that it was not a crab. Almost as a penalty for his naivete and credulousness, he is abused by his own father as a means to escape from the greyhounds, which kill him instead of the old wolf. Apparently, the criticism voiced here is directed both at the deceptive, hypocritical old person and at the uncritical, entirely obedient young person who should have protested against the false claim voiced by his father. Neither old age nor youth proves to be a guarantee against foolishness, viciousness, and moral depravity, which confirms, once again, The Stricker's highly complex approach to the topic of 'old age.'

Although the poet here does not address the life and conditions of old people per se, he reflects on their abilities, skills, mental capacities, but also on their virtues and vices, and demonstrates that they are as much part of the human community as young people and adults in their prime time. Old age as such does not seem to interest The Stricker in this specific narrative context, but this observation conforms mostly with the general themes and interests pursued by his contemporaries who usually focused on the adventures of the members of the Round Table, on chivalry, and the quest for self-identity (*Lancelot*, *Wigamur*). Certainly, Hartmann von Aue had included a short description of an old man in his *Erec* when he integrated the figure of Koralus, Enite's old and impoverished father, who is presented as a beautiful, not at all frail and decrepit person.⁶¹ Wolfram von Eschenbach allowed a short glimpse on an old man in his description of old Titurel whom young Parzival suddenly discovers in the background of the Grail castle, Munsalvaesche. Not yet being aware of their close family relationship—it is his own grandfather—Parzival feels a strong attraction to this old man who seems to him the most beautiful old person he has ever seen.⁶²

Nevertheless, here we are confronted with a frail and suffering person who does no longer interact with the other members of the court. Walther von der Vogelweide, on the other hand, was the first to compose an entire elegy dedicated to old age, singing a melancholy song about the quick passing of his life as if he had lived in a dream.⁶³ The examples of old people in The Stricker's various narratives, however, shed significant light on the much wider range of possible

⁶¹ Hartmann von Aue, *Erec*. Mittelhochdeutscher Text und Übertragung von Thomas Cramer (1972; Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2003), 275–434.

⁶² Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*. Studienausgabe. Mittelhochdeutscher Text nach der sechsten Ausgabe von Karl Lachmann. Übersetzung von Peter Knecht. Einführung zum Text von Bernd Schirok (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1998), Book 240, 23–30.

⁶³ Walther von der Vogelweide, *Leich*, *Lieder*, *Sangsprüche*. 14., völlig neu bearbeitete Auflage der Ausgabe Karl Lachmanns mit Beiträgen von Thomas Bein und Horst Brunner, herausgegeben von Christoph Cormeau (Berlin and New York, 1996), no. 97.

approaches to this stage in human existence for the literary treatment of knighthood, courtly love, and political and military conflicts.

Surprisingly, the major project by Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby to explore the private life in the Middle Ages yields practically nothing about old age,⁶⁴ although a careful combing of the literary evidence proves to be pleasantly enriching in this regard. Again we can observe that a new approach to the literary documents informed by the theoretical concepts of Old Age Studies promises to yield many new insights.

The entertaining, didactic short verse narrative (*mære*), “Der Schlegel” by Rüdiger der Hünkhöfer, composed in the last quarter of the thirteenth century, hence in close chronological proximity to The Stricker’s works, confirms this observation in great detail.⁶⁵ Although the narrative motif finds numerous parallels in world literature, including the Bible, exempla and sermon literature,⁶⁶ Rüdiger’s version stands out for its unusual conclusion and the intricate structural development. The text has survived in five manuscripts from the early fourteenth to the middle of the fifteenth century, but we know hardly anything about the author except for his origin, Hünkhöfen near Regensburg.⁶⁷

Closely following the Biblical account of the Fourth Commandment, the author addresses his narrative both to young and old people (8). He laments that young people no longer pay respect to old people, which would lead to the downfall of the world (16–20), as his tale promises to illustrate. It deals with a rich and highly respected merchant who is blessed with two daughters and three sons. After his wife’s death, he decides to hand over all his properties to his children and to lead a virtuous life in their care. This would also improve the chances that they would remember him well after his death (58). However, he does not seem so frail that

⁶⁴ *Revelations of the Medieval World*, ed. Georges Duby, trans. Arthur Goldhammer. A History of Private Life, II (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985; 1988). The same applies, disappointingly, to Ernst Schubert, *Alltag im Mittelalter: Natürliches Lebensumfeld und menschliches Miteinander* (Darmstadt: Primus, 2002); and *Daily Life in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Richard Britnell (Thrupp, Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1998).

⁶⁵ Here quoted from *Novellistik des Mittelalters: Märendichtung*. Herausgegeben, übersetzt und kommentiert von Klaus Grubmüller. Bibliothek des Mittelalters, 23 (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1996), 112–76. For the relevant literary-historical background information, see Grubmüller’s commentary, 1070–82.

⁶⁶ See, for instance, the account of John of Cavacia contained in Jacobus de Cessolis’ *Liber de moribus* from ca. 1300; cf. Oliver Plessow, “Kulturelle Angleichung und Werteuniversalismus in den Schachzabelbüchern des Mittelalters,” *Chess and Allegory in the Middle Ages*, ed. Olle Ferm and Volker Honemann. Sällskapet Runica et Mediaevalia. Scripta minora, 12 (Stockholm: Runica et Mediaevalia, 2005), 57–97; here 74–75.

⁶⁷ Grubmüller, *Die Ordnung, der Witz und das Chaos*, 115, 119–21.

he could not remarry, but he chooses not to do so because it might seem inappropriate at his age, and because his children might object to it.

At first the widower's plan seems to work, as his oldest son takes good care of him, but after seven weeks the young man urges him also to visit his brother. The latter welcomes him most friendly, but already forty days later he sends him off to the third brother, who loses his patience with their father after five weeks. Soon enough, no one welcomes him anywhere, and he quickly becomes a bother for them all, and the great mistake that he had committed when he gave all his goods to his children dawns upon him quickly (271–78). No one wants to invite him to their houses, and poverty and coldness make him suffer badly. His physical conditions deteriorate because of the bad food, and his outfit is torn and tattered. One day, however, he runs into an old friend who helps him out by giving him a most intelligent advice and highly effective help. He has a mighty chest being built and placed in a vault, as if it had been stored at that location for a long time. The next time the old man visits his oldest son, he arranges his clothing so as to make the key to the lock secretly visible, and the young man immediately develops a curiosity about its purpose. He suddenly treats his father with good wine and elegant clothing because he reveals to him the secret of the chest which allegedly contains his last savings. But there are five locks in total, and the father plans to give one key to each of his children; only when they are all together would they be able to open the chest.

The subsequent development of the narrative proves to be particularly interesting because the son insists that his father dress more properly for their social status (672–73), whereas before he could not have cared less. But the old man secretly thanks his long lost friend who had provided him with this cunning strategy (680–85), whereas he clearly sees through his son's motivation for his totally changed behavior. Suddenly, he is treated with the best foods, as it would be appropriate for the founder of the family (693). As soon as the other sons observe this radical change, they investigate the cause for this, and also learn of this secret chest. Out of greed, while certainly not out of deference to or love for their father, they then vie for his presence in their houses and treat him exceedingly well. But whereas the sons only hope to gain some of the presumed treasures in the chest, and try to outdo each other to gain the father's favor, he remains calm and even considers the other poor people to whom he hands out the clothing that he had to exchange for better ones (985–90).

When his death is approaching, the old man entrusts four other citizens and the priest with the five keys which his children are to receive only after his death. As the narrator comments, this strategy guaranteed him an honorable funeral, which would not have happened if his friend had not conceived of this clever trick with the chest (1113–18). The children, most anxiously awaiting the end of the funeral, entirely disregarding their father, rush to the chest, but to their utter surprise and

disappointment it contains nothing but a mighty stick to which a note is attached. It says that a man who gives away all his treasures to his children before his own death would deserve a solid beating (1135–47), which also implies strongest criticism of the children and their disrespectful treatment of their father. The epimythion, however, adds the further comment that good friends are to be more trusted than relatives, even members of the own family. According to Rüdiger, there would still be some people at his time who could be more trusted than blood relatives (1173–76), which can be certainly read as a timeless teaching, as reflected in countless similar tales, riddles, narratives, and dramas throughout time all over the world.⁶⁸ We can even discover this motif, apart from numerous sermons,⁶⁹ reflected in late-medieval frescoes,⁷⁰ which clearly indicates, first, that it profoundly appealed to late-medieval audiences, and, second, that it probably found such a wide-spread response because of its realistic assessment of how old people were treated by their children.

For our purposes, however, we can also look beyond the obviously moral and religious teachings and examine the remarkable emphasis on the old man and his miserable treatment at the hands of his children. First of all, the loss of his wife also means for him the loss of any motivation to continue with his life as in the past (41). Then, the feeling of loneliness and fear of death makes him change his entire existence, abandoning his previous profession and turning all his wealth over to his children (50–55). The father completely trusts that his children will take care of him if he transfers all his money to them, but he finds himself badly misled in this assumption. In fact, and this would be our third observation, the children dislike to have their father around them and would prefer to have him move away out of their sight. They live up to the ethical expectations only once they hope to milk more money out of their father, and so they find themselves badly deceived and fooled.

But the father is also reprimanded, our fourth observation, for being so ignorant of the reality in human life. The idyll of the harmonious family in which the young generation happily takes care of the old generation once the younger has moved

⁶⁸ See Grubmüller's literary-historical commentary, 1072–75. Another powerful example would be Heinrich Kaufringer's "Die halbe Decke" (ca. 1400), Heinrich Kaufringer, *Werke*, ed. Paul Sappeler. I. *Texte* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1972), no. 21, 224–27; for some critical perspectives, see Sarah Westphal-Wihl, "Pronoun Semantics and the Representation of Power in the Middle High German Märe 'Die halbe Decke'," *Women in German Yearbook* 5 (1989): 91–107; more broadly conceived: Ralf-Henning Steinmetz, "Heinrich Kaufringers selbstbewusste Laienmoral," *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 121, 1 (1999): 47–74.

⁶⁹ http://gahom.ehess.fr/thema/exempla.php?id=4074&page=index_de.php (last accessed on Nov. 9, 2006).

⁷⁰ Paul Clemen, *Die gotischen Monumentalmalereien der Rheinlande*. Publikationen der Gesellschaft für Rheinische Geschichtskunde, 41. Textband, mit Beiträgen von Burkhard Freiherrn von Lepel und Margot Remy (Düsseldorf: L. Schwann, 1930), S. 228–35.

into the older generation's previous position and has taken control of all money and properties falls flat on its face. Fifthly, old people easily experience miserable destitution if their close family members do not feel any responsibility and basically abandon them. The old man in Rüdiger's narrative used to be a wealthy man, and he ought to be able to enjoy his retirement, but having given away all his money and wealth to his children, he suddenly discovers what it means to be poor and old, sick and unwelcome wherever he turns. In other words, this *mære* combines the two critical themes of poverty and old age, and indicates that one phenomenon makes the other one even worse.⁷¹ Moreover, old people were not necessarily welcome by their children, unfortunately a timeless observation, as literary documents and images have demonstrated throughout time.⁷²

As Shulamit Shahar confirms, "Medieval culture was as aware of the discrepancy between the love and devotion of parents to their children and vice versa, as were later periods. (Perhaps that was why they expatiated so much on the duty of offspring to their parents.) The facts were stated ruefully, but with an acceptance of the nature of the human condition. The love and care of parents for their children were depicted as arising from a natural instinct, not so the affection of offspring for their parents."⁷³ This finds also vivid expression in Heinrich Kaufringer's *mære* "Die halbe Decke," composed sometime around 1400, one of many versions of this motif highly popular throughout the entire Middle Ages.⁷⁴ Kaufringer clearly connects his tale with the Fourth Commandment, but he laments that people often do not comply with it anymore and mistreat their old parents.⁷⁵ When these become a burden for their children they disregard them and

⁷¹ Since the late Middle Ages mass poverty grew in considerable proportions and made the poor and old people to an increasingly disliked marginalized, though perhaps statistically certainly not negligible group, see Michel Mollat, *Die Armen im Mittelalter*, trans. Ursula Irsigler (1978; Munich: Beck, 1987), 142–73, et passim. See also *Power and Poverty: Old Age in the Pre-Industrial Past*, ed. Susannah R. Ottaway, L. A. Botelho, and Katharine Kittredge. Foreword by W. A. Achenbaum. Contributions to the Study of Aging, 27 (Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 2002).

⁷² See, for example, David G. Troyansky, *Old Age in the Old Regime: Image and Experience in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 50–76.

⁷³ Shulamit Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 92.

⁷⁴ For the relevant background information, see Klaus Grubmüller's commentary to *Novellistik des Mittelalters*, 1269–72, though this narrative is not included in his edition and translation. For additional information on the literary tradition of the motif of the ungrateful son, see Marga Stede, *Schreiben in der Krise: Die Texte des Heinrich Kaufringer. Literatur - Imagination - Realität*, 5 (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1993), 161–74.

⁷⁵ Heinrich Kaufringer, *Werke*, ed. Paul Sappier. I.: *Text* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1972), no. 21, 224–27. The literary motif can be found in many other texts until today, as I was informed by Christine Dreyer, Krefeld, Germany. She is familiar with a popular version of a ballad from the 1930s ("Die Rossdecke") in which, however, the old man is finally thrown out of the house in the middle of winter, whereas the grand-son, thirty years later, treats his father the same way: "Doch 30 Jahre drauf ließ Georg auch ihn / fort ins Elend zieh'n" I would like to thank Ms. Dreyer for alerting me to this modern song version.

betray the loyalty which they owe them. The example provided makes for a very good narrative plot and poignantly highlights the conflicts between the generations, as reflected by Kaufringer's text.

A rich merchant disregards his old father so badly that the latter suffers from frostbite, hunger and thirst (18–22). Moreover, the young man does not care about his father's worries and pain because his heart is closed to him (24). By contrast, he dearly loves his own son, the third generation, who, in a classical development, enjoys the company of his grandfather and tries to help him when the cold in the winter begins to set in. The old man pleads with the child to ask his father for some warm clothes because the latter would not deny anything to his son, whereas he would not even listen to his own father: "der dir nichts verzeihen kan" (39).

As expected, the boy immediately turns to his father and begs him to take care of the grandfather. Surprisingly, the father is rather happy to hear the news, but not because he is pleased about his son's concerns. Instead, because he hates his father, he is delighted to know that the old man is suffering (61). To hide his evil intentions, however, he gets a poor coat and hands it over to his son. When the child sees this piece of poor clothing, he begs his father to get him a second one. The father disagrees and insists that he should be richly clad instead, and should forget about such a rough and ugly coat (79). But his son is not being swayed, and finally is granted the same piece, although, as he then reveals, it would not be for himself (83–84). Instead, he wants to keep it well until the day would come when his father would have grown old and would be in the same plight as the grandfather is in at this moment, and this as a reward for the treatment that the father had given to the latter: "also will ich dir geben lon, / also du meinem enen hast getan; / nicht besser claider ich dir gan" (98–100; I want to give you as a reward the same what you have to my grandfather; I won't grant you any better clothing).⁷⁶

Of course, as to be expected, this powerful lesson, given him by his own child, quickly changes his mind, and, deeply ashamed, the father mends his attitude toward the old man and begins to feed and clothe him most respectfully: "und hette in schon in seiner pflicht" (111). As the subsequent epimythion teaches us ("Darbei süll wir all nun lern," 114), those who neglect their old parents would certainly face severe punishment in the afterlife (118–22). The reason, however, why Kaufringer would have composed this tale needs to be investigated through a closer analysis. The narrative provides a fairly common framework with a three-generation household within the urban community, with the father being a rich merchant who spares no money to spoil his son, whereas he utterly disregards his own father. The narrator laments that the example that he is presenting here is

⁷⁶ This was a highly popular tale and known all over Europe, see Pat Thane, "The Age of Old Age," *The Long History of Old Age*, 9–29; here 10–12.

based on common life experience: "als man sein laider vil sicht, / das es in der welt geschicht" (7–8).

We do not learn how the father had accumulated his wealth, but since the grandfather is still around, we might surmise that Kaufringer drew from a similar source as Rüdiger for his *mære*, with an old father who entrusted all his property to his son and then had to realize that he was abandoned altogether and could hardly survive, badly suffering from hunger and cold. Whereas the father in Kaufringer's tale demonstrates an almost excessive love for his own child, treating him with greatest affection,⁷⁷ the opposite is the case in the relationship with his own father, though we might identify it as a negative affection.⁷⁸ Of course, we could dismiss all these comments as common tropes, yet the poet also indicates the need to reflect upon them and to remedy serious problems within society afflicting old people above all. In their old age, people can no longer take care of themselves, they need help from the younger generation, especially food, shelter, and clothing, but they are in danger of being neglected and left behind.

Kaufringer reflects a deep-seated fear by the old generation and explicitly appeals to the young people in his audience to obey the Fourth Commandment: "Die hailig geschrift das lert: / wer vatter und muoter ert, / dem fristet got sein lankleben" (1–3; Holy Scripture teaches that he who honors father and mother will be given a long life by God). The motivation to compose this narrative results from practical experience, it seems: "als man sein laider vil sicht" (7; as one can see often unfortunately). Interestingly, because of the subtle cooperation between the old man and his grandson does the latter succeed in exerting pressure on his father, which then abruptly makes him change his mind.

Quite naturally, both here as well as in Rüdiger's narrative the middle generation commands almost limitless wealth and leads a carefree life, whereas old age regularly implies a loss of economic and political power, not to speak of the public honor and respect. Each time those of the middle generation do not hesitate to display their wealth openly and freely, if this might serve a specific purpose to enhance their own reputation and esteem. In Rüdiger's tale, however, the deceptive strategy to steal their father's last money utterly fails because the old

⁷⁷ *Childhood in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: The Results of a Paradigm Shift in the History of Mentality*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2005).

⁷⁸ For a first approach to come to terms with emotions in the Middle Ages, see *Kulturen der Gefühle in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, ed. Ingrid Kasten, Gesa Stedman, and Margarete Zimmermann. *Querelles*, 7 (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 2002), *Emotions and Sensibilities in the Middle Ages*, ed. C. Stephen Jaeger and Ingrid Kasten. *Trends in Medieval Philology*, 1 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2003); see also Elke Koch, *Trauer und Identität: Inszenierungen von Emotionen in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters*. *Trends in Medieval Philology*, 8 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2005); for a critical perspectives, see my study "Roman Sentimental in the Middle Ages? *Mai und Beaflo* as a Literary Reflection of the Medieval History of Emotions," to appear in *Oxford German Studies*.

man has, upon his friend's advice, calculated in advance that they would behave that way and so knows how to utilize their strategy to his own advantage, allowing him to lead a comfortable life until his death. In Kaufringer's tale, the son does not deliberately strategize against his father or for his grandfather, although in his naivete and innocence he ultimately helps the latter to regain his traditional role of respected member of the family and his father to come to his senses.

Before we come to our conclusion, it might be worth to taking another look at some of the observations formulated by Hugo von Trimberg because the evidence assembled so far does not seem to lend itself easily to the establishment of a homogenous image of old age in the Middle Ages and beyond. Hugo also appeals to his audience to consider the expectations one has of old people. They should have reached a point in life where they could clearly tell who they are: "Wol im, der selber sich wol bekennet" (21119). Those who long for the time of foolish youth and deliberately reject virtues would simply be a stupid person: "ein tummer man" (21125).

Those who have reached the age of fifty should speak and behave in such a way that they would be respected by society (2130–31). It might be understandable that young people pursue women's love, gambling, and dancing, but old people should know better and refrain from a sinful lifestyle (21132–38). Foolishness, however, can be observed both among young and old, though old fools would be despised much more because they should have learned from past experience and should have corrected their way of life (21139–41). Money, or wealth, on the other hand, would never bestow wisdom upon anyone, not even upon old people (21142–43).⁷⁹ Then, again, Hugo encourages his audience to pay equal respect to young and old and not to favor the one of the other: "Wer junge liute mit den alten / Wol ze friunde kan behalten, / Âne zwîfel der kan niht verderben / und mac wol guot und êre erwerben" (16545–48; He who can stay friends with young and old people alike will undoubtedly never fail and will easily acquire wealth and honor).⁸⁰ In other words, for him every stage in life is to be treated equally, and each person has to live his/her life according to his/her abilities and strengths,

⁷⁹ Leo Behrend, *The Ethical Teaching of Hugo of Trimberg*. Catholic University of America. Studies in German, 1 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1926); Franz Götting, *Der Renner Hugos von Trimberg: Studien zur mittelalterlichen Ethik in nachhöfischer Zeit*. Forschungen zur deutschen Sprache und Dichtung, 1 (Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1932).

⁸⁰ Jutta Goheen, *Mensch und Moral*, 76: "Das Wohlergehen des einzelnen macht Trimberg von der guten Beziehung zu Jung und Alt abhängig, von der Integration in die Gemeinschaft, die Besitz und Ansehen ermöglicht" (Trimberg considers the well-being of the individual dependent on the good relationship between young and old, on the integration into the community, which makes possible the acquisition of property and honor).

whereas foolishness, stupidity, ignorance, and vices can be found everywhere and are not limited to any age group.

Without going much into detail here, it still deserves to be mentioned that young Beafloer is better taken care of by the old and childless Roman senator Roboal and his wife Benigna than by her own widowed father who at an early point even tried to commit incest with her, which sets the entire narrative development into motion: "Er vetert ir michels paz, / danne ir vater, wizzet daz. / Er was ir getriwer vil, / daz ich wol sprechen wil, / danne ir rehter vater was, / von dem si chume genas" (1553–58; he treated her much more fatherly than her own father, let me tell you. He was much more supportive of her, as I have to say, than her actual father, from whose [clutches] she had hardly escaped).⁸¹

In light of these comments we seem to be in a much better position to evaluate the entire corpus of evidence presented here. Both didactic and fictional authors demonstrated a considerable interest in old age and incorporated numerous references, episodes, and motifs concerning that late stage in life into their works for a number of reasons. But it would be futile to look for one common denominator for all examples because some old people are presented as wise and honorable, whereas others prove to be foolish and ignorant, deserving a harsh beating for their own stupidity, as Rüdiger's narrative implies. Old age, however, was not necessarily a time of physical frailty and mental decline, as the fascinating example of the Old Man of the Mountain in The Stricker's *Daniel* demonstrates. Almost as a rule, we can observe that the more the narrative structure of a romance gains in complexity, such as in *Prosalancelot* (also first half of the thirteenth century) or in *Mai und Beafloer*,⁸² the more we can expect old people to appear on the stage as well and assume important functions of various kind, though they never replace or overshadow the protagonists.⁸³

⁸¹ For the complete bibliography on *Mai und Beafloer*, see my edition and translation. Cf. also Albrecht Classen, "Kontinuität und Aufbruch: Innovative narrative Tendenzen in der spätmittelalterlichen deutschsprachigen Literatur. Der Fall *Mai und Beafloer*," *Wirkendes Wort* 48, 3 (1998): 324–344; Nancy B. Black, *Medieval Narratives of Accused Queens* (Gainesville, Tallahassee, et al.: University Press of Florida, 2003), 57–61.

⁸² Quoted from: *Mai und Beafloer: Ein sentimental-höfischer Versroman des späten 13. Jahrhunderts*, herausgegeben, übersetzt und kommentiert von Albrecht Classen. Beihefte zur Mediävistik, 6 (Frankfurt a. M. et al.: Peter Lang, 2006), 29, 30.

⁸³ *Lancelot und Ginover I. Prosalancelot I.* Nach der Heidelberger Handschrift Cod. Pal. germ. 147, herausgegeben von Reinhold Kluge, ergänzt durch die Handschrift Ms. allem. 8017–8020 der Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal Paris. Übersetzt, kommentiert und herausgegeben von Hans-Hugo Steinhoff. Bibliothek des Mittelalters, 14 (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1995), 112, 468, 484, 584, 612, 732, 1106, 1170.

On the other hand, turning back to didactic literature, we can also discover very opposite perspectives depending on the context and intention of a specific text. I have already explored some of Hugo von Trimberg's arguments, but I would like to conclude with a short reference to *Der Welsche Gast*, composed in 1215–1216 by the Italian cleric Thomasin von Zerklære, who wrote it in Middle High German, probably on behalf of Wolfer von Erla, Patriarch of Aquileia. Here we also find a broad sweep of many issues concerning virtues, vices, courtly behavior, education, religious and political values, etc. Amidst this enormous didactic treatise (14752 verses) we also come across some comments about old women and old people at large.⁸⁴ Thomasin reports what an old woman once bragged about her accomplishments in her youth, causing many trials and tribulations among her lovers.⁸⁵ Despite her old age, this woman unabashedly revealed her lack of virtues: "Si tut mir auf gar ir untugent" (1516), although, as the narrator comments, one would normally like to correlate words and deeds in one's old age.

Old people have lost much of their physical strength, but not their determination and will. Even though they are lacking bodily power, their will can still steer toward sinfulness. As an example we see an old woman who proudly displays her beautiful body and tries to put the young women to shame (1527), as if no one would woo them or would show any interest (1528). She complains day and night about the decline in courtly culture and values: "Man phlach in miner chinthait / Vroede und grozzer hoefschait" (1529–30), but this only serves as a pretense to hide her own weakness and loss of beauty, openly demonstrating her foolishness: "Si het und hat noh chlainn sin" (1534; she had and continues to have a small mind).

Subsequently Thomasin turns to courtly love and men's proper treatment of women. The short intermezzo, however, allows us to comprehend once more how much medieval poets had available a wide range of topoi and tropes in their discussion of old people. Here Thomasin expresses nothing but contempt and

⁸⁴ See the contributions by Valerie Garver (early Middle Ages) and Karen Pratt (high Middle Ages) to this volume regarding the portrayal of old women.

⁸⁵ Thomasin von Zerklære, *Der Welsche Gast*, secondo il Cod. Pal. Germ. 389, Heidelberg con le integrazioni di Heinrich Rückert e le varianti del Mebr. I 120, Gotha (mit deutscher Einleitung, a cura di Raffaele Disanto. Quaderni di Hesperides. Serie Testi, 3 (Triest: Edizioni Parnaso, 2001), 1513–15. This edition improves on Heinrich Rückert's edition (1852) and critically consults F. W. von Kries's edition (1995). For further discussions of this outstanding didactic oeuvre, see *Thomasin von Zerklære und die didaktische Literatur des Mittelalters: Beiträge der Triester Tagung 1993*, a cura di Paola Schulze-Belli. Studi Tergestini sul Medioevo. Nuova serie, 2 (Triest: Associazione di Cultura Medioevale, 1996); Susanne Höfer, "Zur gesellschaftlichen Verortung und Funktion der Gelehrten und des gelehrten Wissens im Welschen Gast des Thomasin von Zerklære," *Literatur - Geschichte - Literaturgeschichte: Beiträge zur mediävistischen Literaturwissenschaft. Festschrift für Volker Honemann zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Nine Miedema and Rudolf Suntrup (Frankfurt a. M., Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 2003), 865–77.

casts ridicule on old women who still try to win lovers outside of their marriage bonds. Other poets, however, formulate highly positive ideas about old people, depending on the specific circumstances, the social and political context, and the generic requirements of their individual texts.

Altogether, as we might say, old age was a discourse, or a cultural construct, already in the high Middle Ages, if not already considerably earlier, and attracted much attention, and this quite contrary to modern assumptions that courtly literature is primarily focused on the life of young people and their development into adulthood.⁸⁶ Consequently, the literary forum proves to be most adequate and fertile for the exploration of the multiple perspectives toward old age. We do not have to limit ourselves to medical-social or nutritional and economic aspects in our investigation of this phenomenon, and can even go beyond philosophical and ethical issues concerning the three stages in life, questions regarding average life-expectancy, and the respect or disrespect which old people enjoyed.

⁸⁶ Bernd-Ulrich Hergemöller, *Die Kindlein spotten meiner schier: Quellen und Reflexionen zu den Alten und zum Verreisungsprozess im Mittelalter*. Historiographische Libelli, IV (Hamburg: HHL Verlag, 2006). For a brief summary of this book, see <http://www.hergemoeller.de/hhl-verlag.htm#KIND> (last accessed on March 18, 2007). See also my review, forthcoming in *Mediaevistik*.

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Merlin, *puer senex* par excellence

There is a manifest discrepancy between the image of Merlin entertained by people in the Middle Ages, and the modern vision of this same Merlin: for most modern writers, starting with Tennyson in the nineteenth century, Merlin is the prototype of the *old* wizard, an old man who has never been young. T. H. White addresses directly the issue of Merlin's age when he makes him aging backwards (getting younger every day) to explain his knowledge of the future,¹ and several other writers have adopted the same bizarre notion.² J. R. R. Tolkien, for his part, suggests when he introduces the wizards to Middle Earth that they came from another shore already aged, since the "Istari" are in fact (re)incarnations of the "angelic" Maiars: there is no inkling that Gandalf or Saruman ever were children!³ In fact, one may argue that this vision of Merlin as an old man "in his dotage" originates in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, where precisely the prophet makes only a brief appearance as the ridiculous old would-be lover of Nimue, the Damsel of the Lake:

... it fell so that Merlin fell in a dotage on the damosel that King Pellinor brought to court, and she was one of the damosels of the lake, that hight Nimue. and he was assotted upon her, that he might not be from her.⁴

In order to be respectable and respected, an enchanter must be old—or at least look old. However, Merlin's first appearance in literature is under the features of *a child*: a preternaturally wise child, of course, an *infans* whose striking trait is that

¹ See *The Sword in the Stone*, the first volume, published in 1938, of T. H. White's complete retelling of the Arthurian legend, *The Once And Future King* (1956). This is a reasoning that does not really make sense, in fact, like most temporal paradoxes, and does not quite solve the enigma of Merlin's prophetic knowledge.

² Fred Saberhagen in *Merlin's Bones* (New York: TOR, 1995), for instance, and to some extent Deepak Chopra in *The Return of Merlin* (New York: Harmony, 1995).

³ See *Unfinished Tales of Numenor and Middle-Earth*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980).

⁴ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur* (London: Penguin Classics, 1986), Book IV, Chapter 1, 117.

he speaks, and tells things no child (and no adult for that matter) should know. But nevertheless a child. It is precisely the contrast between Merlin's childish appearance and his "grown-up" wisdom that makes the value of the character. For the Middle Ages,⁵ wisdom is the privilege of age: one grows wise as one grows old. Merlin is the *puer senex*, this unconscionable fusion of contraries that underlines the scandal of his very existence. Born from the devil, who wanted him to be a cruel parody of Christ, the Antichrist who would bring mankind back to the fold, Merlin never appears as a real child. But then, Christ does not either: while some late apocryphal Gospels enjoy ascribing childish behavior and tantrums to Jesus,⁶ most of the time He behaves as a miniature adult—see, for instance, the scene among the merchants in the Temple—and is also visually represented as such.⁷ When Merlin is first born, the physical traits he is endowed with signify the beast, or the non-human, rather than the child—logically enough, since he is "officially" a child at this stage: he is huge, black, and covered with coarse hair like a bear cub:

Et quant les femes le reçurent de terre, si n'i ot onques cele qui grant paor n'eust por ce qu'eles le virent plus pelu et plus poil avoit qu'elles n'avoient onques veü a autrel enfant avoir.⁸

[And when the women received him, there was never one of them who was not much afraid of him, because they saw him hairier and having more dark hair than they had ever seen on any other child.]

Immediately after his baptism, however, the interesting element about him is his growth-rate: at barely one year of age, he looks like a seven-year old child, which, of course, has also much to do with his gift of speaking, indeed of convincing people through his discourse. The calendar of the few following years is not that precise, however; Merlin is still a child, albeit a very articulate one, during his

⁵ As it is in most "primitive" societies, maybe because getting old against considerable odds is *per se* an achievement worthy of respect – and maybe a proof of intelligence, if not wisdom. Concerning old age in the Middle Ages, and more specifically the motif of the *puer senex*, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, transl. Willard R. Trask. Bollingen Series, XXXVI (1948; 1953; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 98–115.

⁶ See for instance *L'Evangile de l'enfance du Pseudo Mathieu*, in: *Ecrits apocryphes chrétiens* (Paris: Gallimard "La Pléiade", 1997), vol. 1.

⁷ Most art critics have noticed how old the Holy Child looks on Mary's lap in most Western paintings and sculptures until the thirteenth century. Let us not speak of Byzantine art, where the *Theotokos* and Jesus look the same age. See André Grabar, *Les Voies de la création en iconographie chrétienne. Antiquité et Moyen âge. Idées et recherches* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979). But for contrastive perspectives regarding childhood in the Middle Ages, also with respect to the depiction of the child Jesus, see *Childhood in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2005).

⁸ *Roman de Merlin*, ed. Alexandre Micha (Genève: Droz, 1980), § 10, ll. 40–43.

mother's trial and vindication, and when he selects Blaise for his scribe and starts dictating the "Book of the Grail" to him. He remains a child at least until Vertigier's messengers come looking for him: at that point, in fact, he is identified as the "fatherless child" the messengers have been sent out to find through the agency of an indignant playmate who accuses him of cheating. It may be interesting to notice that, although some years have gone by, Merlin apparently has not aged: he still looks like a seven or eight year old child, even though his earlier exponential growth should make him look at least twelve or thirteen. The fatherless child prophesizes in front of Vertigier and reveals to the usurper-king the secret of his falling tower and the imminence of his demise. Then he vanishes—never to be encountered again in the *Romance of Merlin*, or in any of its Latin counterparts, including the *Historia regum Britanniae*; even the memory of him seems to fade,⁹ for when Constant's sons, the young king Pendragon and his brother Uter, are told of Vertigier's "wise advisor" and prophet the barons who mention this character in the hope of ingratiating themselves with the new power make no mention of a child:

Si apelerent Pandragon et Uter son frere a une part, et si lor distrent cele merveille que il avoit conté et que il estoit li meudres devins qui onques fust veuz.¹⁰

[They then took aside Pandragon and his brother Uter, and told them the marvel that he (Merlin) had told, and that he was the best diviner who had ever been seen.]

Indeed, the numerous emissaries Pendragon sends to look for Merlin do not meet any childish figure: wild man, cowherd, eventually "prodome" dressed as a rich *bourgeois*, all the new avatars of Merlin are grown-up, even verging on old age. From that moment on, Merlin in vernacular texts is depicted as an adult, or preferably as an old man.

The very simple, natural, and logical (from a medieval point of view) equation between wisdom and maturity is vindicated by this shift in Merlin's character. The *puer senex* is a freak, a spectacular *topos* that focuses the audience's attention. Merlin needs to be an exceptional child—quasi a monster-child—in order to impress some unbelievable, revolutionary truths on the mind of those who are

⁹ "Unfortunately, we do not have the beginning of the *Rheinische-Merlin*: considering how the author insists on the dimension of old age and respectability in his rendering of the character, it would have been enlightening to see how he dealt with the motif of the *puer senex*. See: *Der Rheinische Merlin, Text – Übersetzung – Untersuchungen der 'Merlin'- und 'Lüthild'-Fragmente*, ed. Hartmut Beckers et al. Schöninghs mediävistische Editionen, 1 (Paderborn, Munich, Vienna, and Zürich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1991).

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, § 31, ll. 67–70.

confronted with this *merveille*. The parallel with Christ, too, must be implemented to the fullest, and as long as Merlin appears first and foremost as an Antichrist who had renounced his diabolical father and as the prophet or apostle of the new Gospel of the Grail, he retains his childish appearance, so much at odds with his preternatural wisdom. In fact, the few other circumstances where he is still depicted as a child are not really related to the “normal” course of the narrative, but rather to visions and allegories: so it is that a child who may, or may not, be Merlin (contrary to what happens in most romance episodes where Merlin exercises his metamorphic power; the text never states clearly the identity of the prophet and the child) appears magically to remind Perceval of his mission in the third part of the Pseudo Robert de Boron’s trilogy, *Perceval*.¹¹ In that case, the childish appearance is precisely useful insofar as it is providing a complete break with the rational course of events: a child is out of place in these sequences, and this is what attracts the character’s, as well as the readers’, attention. Whether the child is really a “semblance” of Merlin or not, the effect produced is the same: a warning, a recollection of the first appearance of the *puer senex* in the story, a reminder of the almost sacrilegious parallel between Christ and the would-be Antichrist. This child does not need to speak up, his presence is in itself the whole of the message he has to convey.

Nevertheless, even in these texts that make good use of the *Wunderkind* motif, there seems to be an hesitation regarding Merlin’s age; immediately after his birth, when the extraordinary hairiness of the child is stressed yet again, some manuscripts introduce a secondary element, which may with some ingenuity be interpreted as complementing what follows (namely the growth-rate of the baby), but may also be literally interpreted as an *essential* presence of old age at the heart of youth:

. . . molt se merveillent de cel enfant qui einsis estoit veluz et qui sembloit estre vielz, et encore n’avoit que .IX. mois et il sembloit qu’il eust .II. ans ou plus.

[. . . (the women) wonder much about this child who was so hairy and seemed to be *old—or vile*—and who looked two-years old or more, while he was only nine months.]¹²

On further reflection, the probable interpolation of the adjective “vielz”—the presence of which is not confirmed in a majority of manuscripts—seems in fact in

¹¹ See Robert de Boron, *le Roman du Graal*, éd. Bernard. Cerquiglini. Bibliothèque médiévale (Paris: Union Générale d’éditions, 1981).

¹² *Ibid.*, § 10, ll. 59–62. Emphasis mine. Phonetically, “vile” and “old” are exactly similar in Old French. The semantic ambiguity may be a reflection on the essential vileness of Old Age—wise, maybe, but also, for instance, is kept out of the “Jardin de Deduit” in Guillaume de Lorris’ *Romance of the Rose*, because only Youth can love. Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *The Romance of the Rose*, transl. Harry W. Robbins. Ed., and with an Intro. Charles W. Dunn (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1962).

complete contradiction to what comes immediately afterward, since a nine-month old baby looking like a two-year old child is hardly an old man. It does read, however, as a gloss, a comment on what is generally assumed regarding Merlin: he is old, even though he looks young—and in any case, *older than his age*.

Besides, and in a rather spectacular manner, the *puer senex* is consistently flanked, as it were, and complemented by a real *senex* offering all guarantees of wisdom and respectability. As soon as he comes out of the maternal tower, Merlin is part of a duet with a character whose main usefulness is to counterbalance the disastrous impression the too diabolically gifted “devil’s son” would risk. Blaise, whom Merlin calls “master,” because “it was his mother’s master” and, mainly, her confessor, is the authority figure who confers respectability to Merlin’s vaticinations. While acting as a scribe under Merlin’s dictation—apparently a subordinate role—he is in fact the guarantor of the truth of what Merlin’s tells. The couple Blaise-Merlin reproduces the Gospel’s pairings of a divine inspirator (“Man,” Lion, Ox or Eagle) and a subservient human conduit (St Matthew, St Mark, St Luke, or St John). Inspiration may be “young,” out of the boundaries of human aging process, but the one who takes responsibility for the divine message has better be old enough to be respected and to communicate the wisdom to the audience.

Blaise *is* old, not so much in fact—it is never stated—as in the area of representations. If for no other reason than to escape the suspicion of “fole amour” between him and his penitent, he has to be an old man—a priest, in the etymological meaning of the word, *presbuteros* in Greek meaning originally ‘the old man whose wisdom entitles him to care for the community.’ As such, and when he goes on to live in the forest of Northumberland to obey Merlin’s injunction, he meets the requirements of the hermit role¹³—and presumably is apt to play the part of the “interpreter” which is one of the basic functions of the hermit. In fact, even when Merlin has “grown-up”, Blaise remains the buttress against which the prophet’s truthfulness is propped.

Blaise’s presence, indeed, does allow Merlin to escape some of the disadvantages of being a child. In some cases, however, introducing both figures at the same time is not practicable, and would even be counter-productive. The basic value of this peculiar “semblance” is to impress Merlin’s audience with the sheer discrepancy between the old wisdom of his pronouncements and his “childish,” weak, and fragile appearance; hence the presence of an accompanying adult would spoil the effect. But sometimes the audience balks at such an incredible association, and

¹³ There is, indeed, no “young” hermit; that it is, per se, an oxymoron is emblemized by the insistence on the strange quality of “Jouseus le jone ermite” in *Perlesvaus: le Haut livre du Graal: roman et prose du XIIIe siècle*, trad. l’ancien français en français moderne par Anne Berthelot. Reinekes Taschenbuch-Reihe, 18 (Greifswald: Reineke, 1997).

refuses downright to listen to or to believe in the words of the so-called *infans*. There is a perfect example of this problem at the very beginning of the *Suite du Merlin*, until recently known as *Suite-Huth*.¹⁴ Merlin, who has chosen to absent himself during the election and coronation of young King Arthur (one might say that his main *narrative* reason is that he has to be absent when the incest between brother and sister is consummated), approaches the king, who has lost his hunting companions, assuming the features of a five- or seven-year old child. He starts prophesizing, announces that Mordret's birth will bring the doom of the kingdom, and eventually mentions the incest. Arthur is duly impressed, but he protests that no one knows his parentage, and consequently no one can accuse him of having slept with his sister. The child Merlin affirms then that he has known very well Arthur's father, King Uterpendragon. At that point, profoundly relieved, Arthur laughs loudly and refuses to listen further: how, he asks, could such a child have known King Uter who has been dead for years?

En non de Dieu, fait li rois, or te di je don't que d'ore en avant net e querrai je mais de chose que tu me dies, car tu n'es mie de l'aage que tu peuusses onques avoir veut mon pere se che fu Uterpandragons, pour coi il ne pot onques riens faire pour toi net u pour lui. Et pour chou te require jou que tu t'en ailles de chi, que après ceste menchoinge si aperte que tu me veus faire acroire pour verité ne quier jou plus avoir la compaignie de toi.

[In the name of God, said the king, I tell you now that I will never believe anything you tell me, for you are not of such an age that you could ever have seen my father if it was Uter Pandragon, and so he could not have done anything for you or you for him. And this is why I request that you go away from here, for after this so obvious lie which you tried to make me believe as true, I don't want to be in your company anymore.]¹⁵

It is worth noticing that Arthur's rejection of Merlin in this passage is formulated almost exactly in the words used for the canonical renunciation of the devil's works and blandishments. In evincing a knowledge unattainable for a "natural" child, Merlin has let too much of his devilish inheritance show up. Thus chastened, and unable apparently not to comply with the king's banishment—although, as the text suggests, he is thoroughly exasperated—Merlin disappears—and comes back a few moments later, as an old and venerable man, who then proceeds to tell the distraught king exactly the same things as the child:

¹⁴ The name stemmed from the possessor of the long-thought unique manuscript. Gérard Roussineau has recently given a new edition of this romance, based on a more complete, recently identified manuscript. See *La Suite du Roman de Merlin*, éd. Gilles Roussineau. 2 vols. Textes littéraires français, 472 (Genève: Droz, 1996).

¹⁵ *La Suite du Roman de Merlin*, § 13, ll. 43–51.

Quant Merlins entent ceste parole, *il fait sanblant que il soit moult courechies*, si se part erraument dou roi et se met en la foriest la ou il vit plus empressee. Et lors canga la samblance que il avoit adont et prent la forme d'un viel home et anchien de l'age de .IIII^{xx}. ans, si feble par samblance k'a painnes pooit il aler, et fu viestus d'une grise robe. En tel abit vint devant le roi, *si ot samblant de sage homme*.

[When Merlin hears these words, he acts as if he were very angry, goes away immediately and enters the forest where it looks the deepest. And then he changed [sic] his appearance that he had at that point and took the form of an old man, very ancient, eighty years of age, so weak in appearance that he could barely walk, and he was dressed in a grey robe. In such a guise he came in the presence of the king, and he looked as a wise man.)¹⁶

Whether it is the repetition, or the higher level of credibility evinced by an old man who presents all the "secondary" traits implying respectability, truthfulness, and trustworthiness, Arthur this time has no choice but to believe Merlin's predictions. This is decisive. From now on in the *Suite du Merlin*, Merlin will always appear as an old man, even in his amorous dealings with Morgue, Arthur's half sister, and Niviène, the Damsel Huntress. Moreover, this short-lived attempt to hide behind the mask of a child is unique in the Merlin-and-Arthur corpus; in all other texts that I know of, whenever Merlin acts as Arthur's advisor, he appears as an old man. Not only as the kind of mature, serious character who first presents himself to Pendragon and Uter, but as a really old figure, endowed with the markers of old age: white hair, stooped countenance, wrinkles, etc. The problem with Merlin, of course, is that you never know what his real aspect is. Whether he chooses a somewhat disreputable appearance, like the infirm beggar who sits outside Pendragon's camp or the hairy cowherd who rudely refuses to come and meet the king, or a more trustworthy and honorable one, like the various "prodomes" who drop in time and again and whisper some interesting suggestions in the king(s)' ears, there is no way to know which one, if any, is the *true* one.¹⁷ In fact, Merlin's appearance is rarely a central point in the episodes that feature him; sometimes, when such a detail is important for the storyline, the text signals that the wise prophet, for instance, adopts the figure of a young and handsome youth in order to court Niniane, or reveals, *post factum*, that the stag who ran havoc in the emperor's palace was no other than Merlin.¹⁸ The rest of the time, his character is

¹⁶ *La Suite du Roman de Merlin*, § 14, ll. 1–8. Emphasis is mine. The interesting fact, besides the repetitive use of words having to do with "appearance," not with essence, is that the weakness of old age seems as much part of Merlin's "dress" as the grey robe the character is wearing: both elements are part of a disguise, not necessarily related to the real being of Merlin.

¹⁷ See Christina Noacco's article: "Le fils du diable: Merlin dans tous ses états," *L'Esplumeoir* 4 (2005): 7–23.

¹⁸ This uncertainty regarding Merlin's appearance extends to all characters around him: the worst case of confused identities is presented in the late *Prophesies de Merlin*, where the three cardinals who have

as little described as any of the main figures of the Arthurian world, Arthur himself, Guenevere, Keu or Gawain.

One may assume, globally, that he favors the *persona* of a middle-aged, respectable but still solid, *bourgeois*: Merlin almost never dons the paraphernalia of a knight.¹⁹ Although he does not engage in fighting, and sometimes expressly refuses to do it due to his preoccupation with his soul's salvation, he nevertheless rides with the army, not unfrequently carrying the royal dragon banner (which he has magically engineered, in fact), and sometimes using his horse as a ram to tackle an opponent; he acts also as a messenger, a task that demands some degree of fitness, even if in the case of Merlin, it rather involves sudden appearances and disappearances than long riding hours. All these elements seem to oppose the notion of a medieval Merlin as an old man; on the other hand, as we have already mentioned, Malory in the *Morte D'Arthur* underlines the ridiculous nature of Merlin falling in love with Nimuë *because* of his age.

But then, the answer to this vexing question may be found in the Indo-European mythology: as Claude Sterckx demonstrated,²⁰ Merlin belongs to the category of Protean gods, those *ancient* divinities endowed with the gift of prophecy, but who very much dislike to make use of this gift to help mankind, and try to escape inquiries through successive metamorphoses. Their prototype is Proteus, whose name has the Greek word for "first" as its root, and whose list of "semblances" is uncannily close to those attributed to Taliesin, Merlin's Celtic *alter ego*. Proteus, like Nereus, is a reluctant soothsayer, whose—mainly animal, but sometimes also "elemental"²¹—transformations are meant to avoid having to answer questions regarding "the past, the present, and even part of the future", and are usually triggered by physical violence. His basic form, however, the one he reverts to when everything else has failed, is one of extreme old age, and there are no tales about a *young* Proteus, even less so a *childish* one. It may be noted, too, that in some cases Proteus's natural appearance is partly that of a snake, from the waist below, which makes him a prime candidate for Christian assimilations to the Devil. Conversely, while Taliesin's statements refer to his being *ancient*, among the oldest living creatures, which makes sense since his soul remains unique from one

come from Rome to check Merlin's orthodoxy fall victims to his illusions and believe the same young male servant is in fact a beautiful courtesan accompanying each of them under a different disguise.

¹⁹ I know of one or two exceptions, duly mentioned in the text, in *Les premiers faits du roi Arthur (Le Livre du Graal)*, vol 1, ed. Philippe Walter et al. [Paris: Gallimard "La Pléiade", 2001]).

²⁰ Cf. Claude Sterckx, *Les Dieux protéens des Celtes et des Indo-européens* (Brussels: Société belge d'études celtiques, 1994).

²¹ Wind, fire, river . . . Nereus, the Old Man of the Sea, is mentioned by Hesiod in his *Theogony* (Hesiod, ed. with Prolegomenon and Commentary by M. L. West [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966]), vv. 333–336). Menelaus conquers Proteus despite the god's attempts at metamorphosis and forces him to reveal the truth regarding Helen in Euripides' eponymous play.

reincarnation to the other, his previous *persona* is that of a young boy, specifically named Gwion Bach, i.e. boy. And it is as a baby, a supposed *infans*, that he is found and named by Elphin, whom he then comforts through a prophetic song which convinces the young prince he has indeed won more than a banal catch of salmon:

Weak and small as I am,
On the foaming beach of the ocean,
In the day of trouble I shall be
Of more service to thee than three hundred salmon.
Elphin of notable qualities,
Be not displeased at thy misfortune;
Although reclined thus weak in my bag,
There lies a virtue in my tongue.
While I continue thy protector
Thou hast not much to fear.²²

In other words, childhood and extreme old age appear as similar, interchangeable characteristics of Protean figures whose real physical aspect cannot be ascertained but whose prophetic talents remain constant through the complete cycle of their reincarnations. Technically, these characters *are* old, since they have been around since the beginning of time; it does not mean, however, that they have to *look* old: their appearance is nothing more than a disposable envelope, which does not add or detract anything to the wisdom acquired over the years/centuries.²³ As in the case of Merlin, most of these “prophets” have a more extensive knowledge of the past than of the future. Among Greek or Roman divinities, this comes in part from a certain disinterest in soothsaying; on the other hand, the rejection of mundane prophesies by the tenants of the Christian faith imposes such a limitation on Merlin’s talent: as he states clearly, the devil does not know the future, although he is often able to extrapolate it from past events and to make credulous human beings believe that he does know it. Most manifestations of the child Merlin’s gift of “second sight” have to do with the past (or the present): he reveals the identity of his father, the affair between the judge’s mother and her priest, the presence of the dragons under Vertigier’s tower.

True prophesies are relatively few — in fact, Wace in the *Roman de Brut* leaves out the long “prophesies de Merlin” that have led to the popularity of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum Britanniae*.²⁴ From an antique or medieval point of

²² Taliesin, in *The Mabinogion*, transl. Lady Charlotte Guest. Ed. and introd. by Leslie Norris (London: The Folio Society, 1980), 247; see also the online version at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/mab/mab32.htm> (last accessed on Feb. 25, 2007)

²³ This might be an interesting parallel to the ‘Old Man’ in The Stricker’s *Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal*, see the contribution to this volume by Albrecht Classen

²⁴ See Wace’s, *Roman de Brut: A History of the British*. Text and Transl. Rev. ed. Judith Weiss. Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), vv. 7733 sq.

view, it makes perfect sense that a creature who has existed since the beginning of the world knows everything past and hidden. As the ability to talk of the "Fatherless Child" demonstrates, his childish appearance is no more than a convenient envelope, a mask placed for a moment on the face of the Wise Old Man (or God): "*Iarwain Ben-Adar*, oldest and fatherless", as Tolkien would describe his *true* merlinesque figure, Tom Bombadil.²⁵

A last observation needs to be added here: at the end of the prose *Perceval*, Merlin retires to an "*esplumeoir*," an interesting variant of the grave or prison where he is usually shut in. Numerous hypotheses have been formulated about this place, since the word is a *hapax legomenon* and the context not peculiarly enlightening. The most probable one suggests that the *esplumeoir* is a kind of cage where one puts the hawks and falcons—let us not forget that the *merlin* is a small falcon—to moult. According to this interpretation, Merlin could be seen as a human version of the phoenix: when growing old, he would retire to his *esplumeoir* and step out again, reborn, as it were, as a child. Trying to determine how old Merlin truly is, trying to assess whether his real appearance is the *puer senex* who impresses Blaise's and Vertgier's clerics, or the wise old man whom Arthur encounters in the forest, is a completely futile enterprise: a "hero with a thousand faces,"²⁶ Merlin cannot be pinned down at any age of life. His aptitude to adopt any aspect betrays a completely a-temporal essence; *puer senex* he is, indeed, insofar he is simultaneously *puer* (but never *infans*) and *senex*, without ever being one or the other for good. As Pendragon's well-meaning advisors unwittingly demonstrate, there is no way one can identify Merlin, because he has no definite appearance, and no definite age—and even those who think they know him have no idea of his nature:

Et [li rois] se merueille molt et fait apeler cels qui disoient conoistre Merlin et lor demande: "Seingnor, nos atandons Merlin, mais il n'i a celui de vos par le mien esciant qui le connoisse; et se vous le connoissiez, si le me dites." Et il responnent: "Sire, ce ne puet estre, se nous le veons, que nous nou connoissons bien." Et li prodrom qui fu venuz devant le roi parole et dist: "Seingnor, puet cil bien conoistre autrui, qui ne conoist bien pas soi?" Et il respont: "Nous ne disons pas que nous le conoissons de tout ses affaires, mais nos conoistrons bien sa samblance, se nos la veom." Et le prodrome respont: "Ne conoist pas bien home qui ne conoist que la samblance, et si le vos mosterrai." ²⁷

²⁵ He is definitely not a Gandalf, who is a more "fancy" wizard, true to the developing modern type of wizards. Tom Bombadil, a more secretive and mysterious figure, strikingly resembles the very atypical Merlin featured by Tolkien's friend C. S. Lewis in *This Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946).

²⁶ To use, and abuse, the title of a very famous book by Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 2nd ed. (1968; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

²⁷ *Ibidem*, § 34, ll. 14–27.

[And the king wonders and has called together those who said they knew Merlin, and asks them: "Lords, we are waiting for Merlin, but there is no one among you, as I am able to ascertain, who knows him. And if you know him, tell me." — "Sire," they said, "it cannot be, if we see him, that we don't know him very well." And the respectable man who has come in the king's presence spoke shift of tense and said: "Lords, can one who does not know himself well know somebody else?" And they answer: "We do not say we know him thoroughly, in all his traits, but we will know his appearance well enough if we see it. And the wise man answers: "he does not know somebody well, who knows the appearance only, and I shall prove it to you."]

The barons of Logres categorically refuse to face the permanent "vacillation" of Merlin's *affaire*, because it questions in fact their own comprehension/apprehension of themselves; they try to fall back on a philosophical distinction between *estre* and *paraistre*; even that, however, is too dangerous in the long run. When they say they will know Merlin's exterior if they see it, it is wishful thinking: they know nothing of his ability to change his looks at will. The masquerade Merlin plays in order to delight the young princes and to gain their good will is just a parlor trick, pleasant, but eventually more disturbing than it is worth. Fixing Merlin's image firmly in the category of "old man," on the contrary, enables the Arthurian romance to stabilize the very mutability of the world, to restore order where the changing transfigurations of the prophet had seemed to mirror an increasingly chaotic world. Merlin himself is the one who puts an end to the game, when he assumes this aged *persona* to save Uter; as he tells the king, surprised that his brother did listen to this disreputable-looking jester, in this circumstance, he took on "an old and wise appearance" ("*une vieille semblance saige*", *ibid.* §35, ll. 23–24). The equivalence between old age and wisdom is confirmed, and Merlin's changing aspect is, once and for all, subsumed under the mask of the Old Sage. Dont acte.

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Age-Old Words of Wisdom: The Power of the Aged in Grail Literature

They that weren glorie of my youthe, whilom weleful and grene, conforten now the sorwful wyerdes of me, olde man. For eelde is comyn unwarly uppon me, hasted by the harmes that Y have, and sorwe hath comandid his age to ben in me. Heeris hore arn schad overtymelich upon myn heved, and the slakke skyn trembleth of myn emptid body (Boece, *Consolacione Philosophie* I, 10–17).

“My mother asked me to seek advice of a man whose locks were grey. . . . My mother was right,” said the boy. “An old man’s words are free of guile” (*Parzival*, 92)

Few anticipate the onset of old age with joy or happiness. The Fountain of Youth, isles of Avalon, alchemical potions, and death-wishes of old men knocking on Mother-earth’s door reveal man’s desire to escape its pains. Medieval didactic literature suggests plague and destitution further impel people to escape imaginatively. As Shulamith Shahar notes, in the Middle Ages, “both the religious and the secular literature abounded in descriptions of the ills of old age: the body’s increasing infirmity and ugliness, the ailments, the failing of the mental faculties, reasoning and memory, with the consequent physical and mental anguish suffered by the old person . . . descriptions of the deterioration of both body and spirit were quite merciless.”¹ The well-known *Pricke of Conscience* exemplifies this penchant for sensationally dramatizing old age—changed complexion, wrinkled skin, feeble constitution, falling head, running, drooping nose, stinking breath, dim eyesight, stooping back, deafness, short-tempered groaning:

His pows schal by styлле wyth oute sterynge	pulse, be still,
His fete schul wexe colde his wombe chonynge	churning

¹ Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: Winter Clothes Us in Shadow and Pain*, transl. Yael Lotan (1995; London and New York: Routledge, 1997; 2004 [in paperback]), 7.

And ₃ if a ₃ ong man ny ₃ the deth be	near
He is euere wakyng for slepe may nat he	
And ₃ if an olde man be ny ₃ the deth	
He schal fram slepyng hym kepe unneth	scarcely

Many man seiþ these tokenes ev(er)ychone	everyone
Beþ of man whan he schal dye sone. ²	are true

How people and characters perceive old age varies widely, but inevitably those who see themselves as useful rather than powerless, keepers of tradition rather than outdated fossils, are less obsessed with declining health; most adopt a sociological self-evaluation based on utility. Just as the *wergeld* of a young, strong, man surpasses that of a child or aged man in the Middle Ages, and the price of an athletic young slave exceeds that of a child or elderly man,³ the physical value of youth outweighs that of age. However, an older man's knowledge, wisdom, perspicacity and preserving tradition are appraised more highly: he holds more social significance and power in his community. Thus, conflicting perceptions converge to define the aged man as Shahar notes:

Old Age was represented, on the one hand, as the stage of life in which the person goes into a physical and mental decline, develops negative qualities, suffers and is full of anxiety; and on the other hand, as the stage at which one attains wisdom, serene freedom from lusts, and the ability to counsel others and look after the salvation of one's own soul."⁴

When are marginality,⁵ feebleness of old age, and loss of powerful posts offset by great wisdom, counsel, and preservation of the past? In literature, this question rests with the author.

Elderly men and women dominate Grail literature: wise, long-lived participants, revered and cherished as prolific sages and keepers of the castle of knowledge,

² Jean E. Jost, ed. *The Southern Recension of the Pricke of Conscience: Huntington Manuscript 128*. Arizona: Medieval and Renaissance Tests and Studies, forthcoming. f 9r–10v, ll. 653–787.

³ Shahar notes that "In the book of Leviticus . . . the highest valuation was placed on a man between 20 and 60 years of age—50 shekels. The valuation of a woman of the same age was 30 shekels. At 60, a man's value went down to 15 shekels, 5 less than that of a male between five and 20 years of age. A woman's value went down to 10 shekels, equal to that of a female between five and 20 (Lev. 27:1–7)" (*Growing Old*, 5–6).

⁴ Shahar, *Growing Old*, 4.

⁵ "Sometimes the chief factor of marginality was the social status, and the old were listed within the low social stratum, alongside cripples and strangers If the aged were counted among the weak members of society along with the children (on grounds of age), women (because of their sex), and peasants and shepherds (because they belonged to the lowest social stratum), it was because they were considered to be physically or mentally feeble, or both, and did not belong to the center of power" (Shahar, *Growing Old*, 3).

offer expert advice and words of wisdom to youth.⁶ Regardless of brawn, inexperienced knights must learn the rules of life, love, and war. Although the elderly may no longer compete in battles, their contributions to those who can amply compensate for their waning strength. Their social roles are numerous, their place esteemed, their council heeded. In *The Quest Del Saint Graal*, for instance, seasoned hermits are the font of knowledge, prophetic interpreters of dreams, and repository of spiritual advice. Their counsel instantiates their value. The sophisticated Lancelot and the naïve Perceval equally need knowledge and understanding of elderly, venerable holy men and women. After Lancelot dreams an extended, complicated dream, he searches out the holiest anchorite at a nearby chapel to gloss his vision; the holy man promises to unfold the meaning of the tournament for him. Likewise Perceval's aunt and her Welsh and German cognates offer wisdom to her young, naïve nephew, dissuading him from fighting the best knight, and warning him not to be rash, as were his brothers who perished victims of their own arrogance. She wisely prophecies the end of the quest, and offers spiritual and physical advice. The aged's words of wisdom compensate for their waning physical prowess, thus offering a more potent contribution in this *bildungsroman*.⁷ A comparison of youth and eld highlights the weakness and naivete of the former and the strength and value of the latter in reclaiming the Grail and its salvific powers to restore the reign to health.

⁶ The same phenomenon can be observed in early medieval, mostly heroic, literature, see Britt C. L. Rothausser's contribution to this volume, and also Albrecht Classen's comments in his introduction.

⁷ Although few studies of the Grail-cycle focus directly on elderly or female contributions to the youth's physical, mental, and emotional evolution, many discuss its corollary, the youthful journey toward maturity itself. Roger Sherman Loomis (*The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1963], 47–54), for example, points to Perceval's correspondences to the boyhood adventures of Celtic heroes such as Cuchulainn and Finn, and the mortal man's journey to the Otherworld's castle of the god Lug. Mario Roques (Preface, *Perceval li Gallois ou le Conte du Graal*, transl. Lucien Foulet [Paris: A.G. Nixet, 1970]) sees the journey as man's attempt to overcome mortality by visiting that land of the dead, but not restoring or saving the world by failing to fulfill some inconsequential task. Albert Pauphilet compares the adventure to two sea tales—of a sailor who discovers the underwater Cathedral of Ys, but fails to offer to serve at mass, and of a woman who finds an underwater of shops, but fails to purchase any cloth, having no money (Albert Pauphilet, *Etudes sur la Queste del Saint Graal attribuee a Gautier Map* [Paris: Champion, 1921]); Cline summarizes, "Like many Celtic tales, Perceval's boyhood adventures are concluded by the youth's recognition as a hero at a king's court" (*Perceval, or the Story of the Grail*, transl. Ruth Harwood Cline [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985], xv). G. Ronald Murphy, S. J. (*Gemstones of Paradise: The Holy Grail in Wolfram's Parzival* [Oxford, New York, et al.: Oxford University Press, 2006]) compares the instruction of the equally effective mature guardians in French and German versions.

Chrétien de Troyes

William W. Kibler reminds us that Chrétien de Troyes is “the first to write of the adventures of the Graal—with Perceval, the mysterious procession, and the Fisher King . . . [*Le Conte del Graal*, 1180–91] still his most puzzling . . . Chrétien’s most mystifying romance . . . creat[ing] an atmosphere of mystery and wonder.”⁸ This unsolved problem-solving romance utilizes cognition, understanding, knowledge, or the lack thereof, as the basis of the problem, and the romance. The tension between experience and authority, youth and age, is palpable from the opening scenes. Chrétien’s methodology reinforces this tension: privileging authority, it draws on ancient classics, scriptures, and current proverbs, all presented as valued sources of knowledge. His protagonist is scribed as a willful, self-determined young man, perhaps indulged and fawned upon by an adoring, over-protective mother and household. His resultant pattern of self-willed determination, relying on his own severely limited experience and discounting authorities, thwarts his success. He badly needs a mentor to enhance his prowess and socialize his untamed behavior. His heroes are the patient, elderly teachers under whose guidance he succeeds. But, the boy’s learning curve is very shallow. After achieving sufficient knowledge, he is responsible for using it wisely—with the discretion of elde. According to Ruth Harwood Cline,

Chrétien describes the education of a rough and selfish young man . . . courage and skill with weapon come to Perceval by nature, and despite his many blunders, he is recognized by Arthur’s court as a fine knight. His psychological development is traced over a long period. Callous and naive, Perceval memorizes the precepts of knightly behavior as he did his childhood prayers, but for a long time he is unable to grasp the spirit of chivalry. His indifference to suffering causes his failure to help his dying mother, his insolence to the Maiden in the Tent, his gauche behavior at King Arthur’s court, and his failure to converse with the Fisher King and to ask the liberating questions at the grail castle . . . His decision to return to the grail castle and attempt to rectify his mistake, instead of accepting the consequences of his error and pursuing worldly glory, is a noble one, but five years of fighting bring him no closer to his goal. After his conversation with the hermit, Perceval is last seen embarking upon the road of penitence and faith.⁹

Elderly sages are everything this boy is not. He must learn the lessons of his ancestors, from his ancestors, such as the hermit. His maturation occurs at the behest and supervision of wise, seasoned men and women, often relatives. When

⁸ William E. Kibler, *Chrétien de Troyes, Arthurian Romances* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 1, 9, 11. Subsequent references to this volume will be given in the text.

⁹ *Perceval, or the Story of the Grail*, transl. Ruth Harwood Cline (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), xvi.

young Perceval first witnesses mature, shining-armored knights, he concludes they are devils, but eschews his mother's advice. He admits she spoke the truth that devils are fearful, arrogantly scorns her warning, and plans to strike the strongest one. His arrogant, defiant attitude toward his first mentor and to others older and wiser than he prevent his Grail success and salvation of the realm. And he is aptly punished. Without her wisdom, he is doomed to failure, although her words are never far from his consciousness: "Ne me dist pas mere fable, / qui me dist que li ange estoient / les plus beles choses qui soient" . . . Et si dist ma mere meisme / qu'an doit Deu croire et aorer / et sopoier et enorer"¹⁰ (140–42; 148–50; "My mother did not lie to me when she told me that angels were the most beautiful creatures alive . . . And my mother herself said that one must believe in God and adore, worship and honour him," 382, 383). However, he feels no obligation to heed his older relative's advice unless he chooses. Rather, he tests her wisdom against his own ignorance, giving it no credence. Similarly, when Perceval engages that first-seen gloriously attired knight, icon of mature military authority, he controls the dialogue, ignoring Gawain. When Gawain asks if the lad has seen knights and ladies passing by, he dismisses the question. Disrespectful of knightly power or authority, Perceval queries the lance's value, ignorantly privileging his own javelin.

When Gawain repeats his inquiry, which again Perceval refuses to answer, instead asking the name and use of Gawain's shield, the knight reports that Perceval knows no manners for refusing to answer directly. Hearing the experienced elder's complaint, the youth might have learned courtesy, but clearly pays no attention; when Gawain politely asks a third time: "Vaslez, fet il, ne te soit grief, / mes des .v. chevaliers me di, / et des puceles autresi / se les ancontras ne veïs" (252–55); "Young man, don't be upset if I insist; tell me whether you have seen or encountered the five knights, and also the maidens," 384), Perceval pulls on Gawain's hauberk, again rudely ignoring him. This scene reveals three facts: (1) Perceval refuses to contend with or satisfy others' needs; (2) he perceives or learns only what he chooses; (3) these traits are never weaned out of him: even at the final Grail scene, the lad repeats the same errors—ignoring others and hearing what he pleases. Without the power of the elderly guide, which he rejects, and others' advice along the way, which he ignores, the youth will fail. He needs a wise old man to save him.

Once cognizant of knighthood, Perceval insists he will join. Now his mother reveals his history, father's illness, and family calamity—the context a successful Grail-seeker needs. But alas! It falls on deaf ears. She describes his noble maternal

¹⁰ *Les Romans de Chrétien de Troyes: Le Conte du Graal (Perceval)*, ed. Felix Lecoy (Paris: Librairie Honore Champion, Editeur, 1973). Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

and paternal lineage, and reports vital facts, which had he absorbed, would have unlocked the key to the mystery, and the journey:

Vostre peres, si nel savez,
 fu par mi les janbes navrez
 si que il mahaïgna del cors.
 Sa granz terre, ses granz tresors,
 que il avoit come prodom,
 ala tot a perdicioun,
 si cheï an grant poverté.
 Apovri et deserité
 et essillié furent a tort
 li prodomë après la mort
 Utherpendragon, qui rois fu
 et peres le bon roi Artu . . .
 Vostre peres cest manoir ot
 ici an ceste forest gaste;
 ne pot foïr, mes a grant haste
 an litere aporer se fist. (432–44; 448–51)

[Your father, though you do not know it, was wounded through his thighs and his body maimed in this way. The extensive lands and treasures he held as a nobleman were all laid run, and he fell into great poverty. After the death of Utherpendragon, who was king and father of good King Arthur, the nobles were wrongfully impoverished, disinherited, and cast into exile . . . Your father had this manor here in this wild forest. He could not flee, but he had himself quickly brought here in a litter, 386].

Had he listened to her authoritative words, he would have recalled her tableau of a poor old maimed man wounded through the thighs, impotently lying upon a litter in an impoverished wasteland when he later sees the scene at the Grail Castle. The boy would have recognized his relatives and the identical setting, taken more responsibility for their plight, and sympathetically asked the right question. But “*Li vaslez antant mout petit / a ce que sa mere li dit*” (487–88; “[t]he boy paid scarcely any attention to what his mother said” (387), dismissing a golden opportunity to end the Grail Castle suffering. Because he dismisses her wise words, he fails. Further, his father’s death for grief of his sons, strikingly prophetic of his mother’s death for grief at his departure, could have been avoided had he heeded her message. Rather, he defiantly utters that he will leave, no matter what, dismissing the authority of his elderly mother in favor of non-cognitive sense perception, the excited anticipation of youth. He ignores her tale at his peril.

Although her son has disregarded her authority until now, his mother optimistically attempts to teach the naïve Perceval three customs of the country: (1) helping a maiden in distress is honorable, refraining from more than a

maiden's kiss is proper, accepting a ring or love-token is allowed; (2) asking strangers their names is valuable, keeping company with gentlemen is profitable; (3) and praying for honor in the world is desirable (387–88). Will he internalize these precepts toward women, gentlemen, and his Lord, and learn from a sincere older guide?

As the boy rides away, he notices his mother collapse at his departure, but continues on, anticipating his first adventure. He will not forget his primal, vital source of instruction, whose influence runs throughout the entire romance. As G. Ronald Murphy, S. J. reminds us, "the hero Perceval, almost to his very last line in the story, is searching for his mother and not for a, or the, grail."¹¹ Riding purposefully to a pavilion, he mistakenly thinks it a church, just as he mistakenly thought the knights devils, angels, or God, and follows his mother's advice to worship, noting "Voir dist ma mere tote voie, / qui me dist que mostiers estoit / la plus bele chose qui soit" (656–59; "my mother spoke the truth when she said to me that a church is the most beautiful thing there is," 389). He has not yet learned to distrust his own interpretation of reality—knights are not supernatural beings, and a tent is not a church. Not surprisingly, he misinterprets his mother's instructions in greeting the lady of the tent: when the lady says "'Vaslez, fet ele, tien ta voie. / Fui, que mes amis ne te voie.' / 'Einz vos beiserai, par mon chief, / fet li vaslez, cui qu'il soit grief, / que ma mere le m'anseigna'" (689–93; "'Please leave.' 'First I'll kiss you by my head,' said the boy, 'no matter what anyone may think, because my mother instructed me to'," 389). Her words clearly do not instruct him to kiss anyone, but "if she grants you a kiss," accept it, but no more. His twenty kisses and removal of her ring are not his mother's instructions; he bellowed: "'Or ça l'anel, jel vuel avoir' . . . a force le doi li estant, / si a l'anel an son doi pris / et el suen doi meïsmes mis" (713; 718–20; "'Now give me the ring; I want it!' . . . The boy grasped her wrist, forcibly straightened out her finger, removed the ring from it, and put it on his own finger," 390). Such behavior, the actions of a rude, spoiled boy, defies his mother's directives; he continues to misinterpret her words of wisdom. The narrator comments: "saiche bien qu'il l'a traïe (778; "he should understand that he had betrayed her," 390), doubly implying the maiden and his mother.

Perceval continues questioning older, more experienced persons, from a charcoal-burner to the King himself, assessing the credibility of their words, and misunderstanding their import. But the narrator claims he heeded no words. With no sense of social status or humility before a king, even when his horse knocks off Arthur's hat, Perceval indecorously refuses the King's request to dismount to be knighted. An older, more mature man would have conceded. All the advice Perceval encounters and dismisses is true, valuable, and potentially helpful, if only

¹¹ G. Ronald Murphy, S.J., *Gemstone of Paradise*, 99.

he were smart enough to absorb it. When Perceval requests the Red Knight's armor, Kay sarcastically returns ". . . Amis, vos avez droit. / Alez les prandre orandroit, / les armes, car eles sont voz" (1001–03; "Right you are my friend! Go and snatch his armour from him right now, for it belongs to you," 393). Although Perceval listens to Kay and Arthur's condemnation of Kay's mocking words, he fails to heed their import, taking them literally when he says to the Red Knight "Metéz les jus, / les armes, ne les portez plus, / que li rois Artus le vos mande!" (1081–83; "Take off your armour! King Arthur commands you not to wear it any more!," 394). His attempts to taunt or bully the Red Knight were neither authorized nor originated by Arthur, but are merely Perceval's wish-fantasy, his semi-purposeful misunderstanding. No elderly person would have done so.

When Perceval encounters a dignified gentleman awaiting him on the bridge, he greets him, saying "Sire, ce m'anseigna ma mere . . . Sire, ma mere m'anseigna / que vers les prodomes alasse / et que a aus me conseillasse, / se creüsse ce qu'il diroient, / que preu i ont cil qui les croient" (1359, 1398–402; "Sir, my mother taught me this . . . Sir, my mother taught me to go up to gentlemen, to take advice from them, and believe what they tell me, for profit comes to those who believe them," 398), also a distortion. Surprisingly, Perceval does not perceive or question the oddity of a seeming stranger, Gornemant of Gohort, awaiting him. The gentleman offers the boy lodging if he follows his mother's and his own advice, a reminder of the value of their mature experience. Gornemant then teaches Perceval most important life-lessons: how to joust, wield weapons, and perform in battle, knowledge which no personal experience could generate. Father Murphy summarizes the elderly Gornemant's wise counsel as follows:

The instruction is short and consists of four principles Perceval must learn before his spurs are attached and he becomes a knight. The first is mercy. If you get the upper hand against an opponent and he is no longer capable of self-defense, show him mercy and do not kill him. The second is not to talk too much: people who talk too much soon discover they've said something they regret. The third is to console any woman who is disconsolate in any way, and the fourth is to go to church and pray to be a good Christian all your life. Having received the instruction and the spurs from his vavasour [sic], Perceval is off, for he "was very impatient to reach his mother and find her alive and well" (Kibler, 402). His quest is still, and will remain, to find his mother.¹²

Remembering her injunction, the boy politely asks the man's name, which recalls his mother's uncertain condition and his need to find her. With great sensitivity, Gornemant encourages the lad to change his Welsh attire to that of a knight, saying "Vaslez, foi que je doi ma teste, / fet li prodome, ainz valent pis" (1610–11; "Friend, you will wear this clothing you see here, if you'll heed my advice," 401). With deference, Perceval asks him why, instead of defensively telling him he

¹² G. Ronald Murphy, S. J., *Gemstone of Paradise*, 151–52.

won't. If only he would remember the virtue of questioning. Gornemant reminds him "Vos me deïstes, biax amis / qant je vos amenai ceanz, / que vos toz mes comandanz / fereiez" (1612–15; "You assured me . . . when I brought you here that you would heed my every command," 401), and the grateful boy responds "Et ge si ferai, / fet li vaslez, ja n'an serai / ancontre vos de nule chose" (1615–17; "And so I shall . . . I'll never oppose you in anything at all," 401). At his departure, the man reinforces three chivalric principles: 1) In battle, if your opponent cannot defend himself, grant him mercy rather than killing him outright; 2) do not be too talkative or prone to gossip; and 3) go gladly to church and pray. The words ring true, for Perceval recalls "Sire, ce m'anseigna ma mere" (1359; "I heard my mother say the same thing," 402)—a reference to his mother yet another faux pas Gornemant corrects. As Kibler points out,

The hermit's advice to Perceval recapitulates his mother's . . . and that of Gornemant . . . Like Gornemant, the hermit both echoes the words of his predecessors and introduces his own elaborations, specifically the details of religious observance. In so doing, he introduces biblical injunctions, in fact mirroring the situation in his source, the Book of Ecclesiasticus (or Sirach), words of wisdom addressed by a father to his son.¹³

Hence, both human and supernatural authority are the means of Perceval's education, however he may interpret or internalize that authority. Ruth Harwood Cline reasonably claims "Gornemant of Gohort knights Perceval in order to regularize the situation caused by Kay's jest about giving him the arms of the Red Knight. Hilka notes that Chrétien begins to refer to Perceval more consistently as 'the knight' rather than as 'the youth' after this point,"¹⁴ a result of his progressive education and evolving consciousness of chivalric principles.

After winning Blancheflor's battle at the next castle, recalling Gornemant's admonition not to slay the losers, he sends two to Arthur as prisoner; his claim that beheading would have been unwise is evidence of his progress. While seeking his mother, he encounters a fisherman who provides the experience of a lifetime. Here, "un bel predome seoir vit / qui estoit de chenes meslez" (3076–77; "A handsome nobleman with greying hair seated on a bed," 419) greets him, apologizes for being lame, and seats the boy near him to witness burning candles; he sees a squire

. veoient
la lance blanche et le fer blanc,

¹³ Kibler, *Chrétien de Troyes*, 520.

¹⁴ Ruth Harwood Cline, 50, note 1 (*Der Percevalroman [Li Conted del Graal]*, ed. Alfons Hilka. "Christian von Troyes sämtliche erhaltene Werke," ed. Wendelin Foerster; vol. 5 [Halle (Saale): Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1932], 653).

s'issoit une gote de sanc
 del fer de la lance an somet
 et jusqu'a la main an vaslet
 coloït sele gote vermoille (3184–89)

[“carrying a white lance by the middle of its shaft . . . with its white point from whose tip there issued a drop of blood” (420)].

A maiden follows with the bejeweled golden grail brighter than the light; another carries a silver carving platter, moving the procession across the bed to the next room. Transfixed by the marvel, but fearing to be impolite, the youth yet refuses to ask its meaning, mistakenly misinterpreting Gornemant's advice to be silent. Chrétien's narrator slyly comments:

. . . il toz jorz el cuer avoit
 la parole au prodome sage,
 se criem que il n'i ait damage,
 que j'ai oï sovant retraire
 que ausi se puet an trop taire
 com trop parler, a la foiee.
 Bien li an praingne ou mal l'an chiee,
 ne lor anquieret ne ne demande. (3234–41)

[“Yet I fear that this may be to his misfortune, for I have heard it said that at times it is just as wrong to keep too silent as to talk too much. Whether for good or for ill he did not ask or inquire anything of them” (421)].

Perceval is not yet wise enough to make such determinations; even when the grail procession passes him a second time. Keeping the gentleman's warning not to speak too much in mind, he remains more silent than he should have, watching the grail pass uncovered before him without asking who was served by it. When does it become incumbent upon a person to use judgment, based on prior knowledge or instruction from an elder? Perceval has not yet learned this fine point. Witnessing the crippled old man being carried away by four strong servants, the youth fails to ask why. Although the grey-haired man offers a thinly veiled invitation to query him, “Je n'ai nul pooir de mon cors, / si covandra que l'an m'an port” (3328–29; “I have no strength in my body, and will have to be carried,” 422), the boy remains silent. This optimal opportunity for Perceval to ask “why?” slips away. By morning, his good intentions—to ask questions—are too late: the opportunity has come and gone, and he has failed the test. Gornemant's advice has gone awry.

Following the servants' footprints, Perceval encounters a wailing maiden, older and wiser than he, holding her decapitated lover in her arms. Her quick intelligence determines that he is a cousin, has encountered her Fisher-King father and his Grail procession, and in one sentence reveals the entire mystery to him:

... il fu an une bataille
 navrez et mahaigniez sanz faille
 si que il aidier ne se pot.
 Il fu feruz d'un javelot
 par mi les hanches amedos,
 s'an est aüz si angoissos
 qu'il ne puet a cheval monter. (3495–501)

[“he was wounded and maimed in the course of a battle so that he can no longer manage on his own, for he was struck by a javelin through both thighs and is still in so much pain that he cannot ride a horse” (424)].

She offers no advice, but vital information for his unraveling the mystery, and criticism through her explanation:

... Perceval li cheits!
 Ha! Perceval maleüreus,
 com fus or mesavantureus
 qant tu tot ce n'as demandé,
 que tant eüsses amandé
 le boen roi qui est maheigniez
 que toz eüst regaaigniez
 ses manbres et terre tenist.
 Ensi granz biens en avenist!
 Mes or saches bien que enui
 en avandra toi et autrui. (3568–78)

[Ah, unlucky Perceval, how unfortunate you were when you failed to ask all this, because you would have brought great succor to the good king who is maimed: he would have totally regained the use of his limbs and ruled his lands, and much good would have come of it! But understand this now: much suffering will befall you and others (424–25)].

This experienced woman with both knowledge about his history and wisdom about his actions, willingly imparts these. Without her explanation, Perceval remains ignorant. Further, she protects his body, authoritatively warning him of his sword's weakness. While she herself cannot physically combat, she facilitates Perceval's doing so with her wise contributions—if only he can abide them.

Traveling through the wasteland, he encounters the bedraggled maid who had experienced Perceval's prior abuse and now accuses him of callous behavior. She is wiser than he, knows the culture as he does not, underwent her lover's punishment because of him, and can articulate the offense and remedy. When her lover would avenge Perceval's maltreatment, the lad masters the lover with the sword. Thus he has absorbed his elderly tutor Gornemant's instruction in battle and behavior. Now Perceval begins using his guide's knowledge: mindful of his guide's call for mercy, he bargains with the lover: mercy for him, if he affords the

same to his beloved. The lad is learning to resolve his crises; as long as Gornemant's advice can be literally applied, he can do so. Without the sage's advice, all his endeavors would fail, despite his natural disposition to succeed.

After a grateful Arthur seeks out Perceval for his deeds of prowess, and revelries are subsiding, an elderly uncouth Cundrie-figure of ugliness with an equally sharp tongue, harshly lambastes the youth, cataloguing his errors in a bid to teach him otherwise:

Chiés le Roi Pescheor alas,
 si veïs la lance qui sainne,
 et si te fu lors si grant painne
 d'ovrir ta boche et de parler
 que tu ne poïs demander
 por coi cele gote de sanc
 saut par la pointe del fer blanc!
 Et le graal que tu veïs,
 ne demandas ne anqueïs
 quel riche home l'an an servoit.
 Mout et mareüreus qui voit
 si bel tans que plus ne covaigne,
 si atant tant que plus biaux vaigne,
 Ce es tu, li maleüreus,
 qui veïs qu'il fu tans et leus
 de parler, et si te taüs! . . .
 . . . se tu demandé eüsses,
 li riches rois qui se s'esmaie
 fust ores gariz de sa plaie
 et si tenist sa terre an pes,
 dom il ne tanra point ja mes. . . .
 Dames an perdront lor mariz,
 terres on seront essilliees
 et puceles desconselliees,
 qui orfelines remandront
 et maint chevalier an morront,
 et tuit avront le mal par toi. (4631–46, 4646–50; 4654–59)

[You entered the castle of the Fisher King and saw the bleeding lance, but it was so much effort for you to open your mouth and speak that you couldn't ask why that drop of blood flowed from the tip of the white shaft! And you didn't ask or inquire what rich man was served from the grail you saw. Wretched is the man who sees that the propitious hour has come but waits for a still better one. And you are that wretched man, for you saw that it was the time and place yet kept your silence! . . . if you had asked, the rich king who is suffering he would already be healed of his wound and would be ruling in peace over the land he shall now never again command . . . Ladies will lose heir husbands, lands will be laid waste, and maidens will remain helpless as orphans; many a knight will die. All these troubles will occur because of you (438)].

This harangue has a marked effect on Perceval: when his comrades save the besieged damsel, he will not go "tant qui il del graal savra / cui l'an an sert, et qu'il avra / la lance qui saine trovee / si que la veritez provee / li ert dite por qu'ele saine" (4711–15; "... until he had learned who was served from the grail and had found the bleeding lance and been told the true reason why it bled," 439). Justly chastened, he has learned responsibility from an elderly, unattractive woman who tells the unabashed truth. Her role in the Grail search is thus significant in training the quester.

During five years of amnesia when Perceval forgets his religious obligations, a seasoned knight instructs him to seek forgiveness at an elderly hermit's chapel. Here he confesses his grail castle omission, and that he has not made amends; the enlightened holy man explains the event: now he learns WHY he failed to ask the Grail questions. He has sinned when his mother fainted and died at his departure, which sin prevented him from inquiring about the lance or grail, or asking who is served by it. This revelation of another old man is further significant knowledge aiding the unraveling of the grail mystery. Peter Haidu points out that "Perceval in the Hermit Episode is at the nadir of his existence . . . the Hermit episode is the bottom of the abysm . . . a place where [his] resurgence begins, thanks to the charity of the hermit."¹⁵ Again, an elderly hermit-relative is privy to his personal life in a way he is not. But his powers of concentration have improved since his mother described his father's history: now he can hear and utilize this information. Again, his informer is a wise old uncle, who reports:

Cil cui l'an an sert fu mes frere,
Ma suer et soe fu ta mer,
et del Riche Pescheor roi,
que filz est a celui ce croi,
qui del graal servir se fait. . . .
d'une seule oiste, ce savons,
que l'an an ce graal aporte,
sa vie sostinent et conforte,
tant sainte chose est li graax. (6199–203, 6206–09)

[“The man served from it is my brother. Your mother was his sister and mine; and the rich Fisher King, I believe, is the son of the king who is served from the grail A single host that is brought to him in that grail sustains and brings comfort to that holy man—such is the holiness of the grail,” 460].

Through one more elderly informer, the lad's story is unfolding. Society needs no wars from old men, but wise words to direct the young and inexperienced. A purifying confession and acceptance of penance—both verbal acts—ensure the

¹⁵ Peter Haidu, *Aesthetic Distance in Chrétien de Troyes* (Geneva: Droz, 1968), 222.

young man's spiritual salvation, again at the hands of a wise, kindly elderly man with knowledge and wisdom to teach his mind and cure his soul.

Peredur Son of Efrawg¹⁶

The Welsh folktale *Peredur Son of Efrawg* reflects a strong, Norman-French dimension, as Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones note, "in background and tone and characterization, in the social and ethical code, in clothes and armour and *realien* generally."¹⁷ Welsh scholars date it earlier than, and influencing Chrétien's version. The authority of the elde in this tale likewise shapes the action of the youth, the direction of the plot, and the resolution of the Grail quest.¹⁸

Initially, the tale reveals that Peredur "sef agauas yn ych yghoz fo ar mab" (101, col. 117; "... had a wise, sagacious woman for mother," 183)¹⁹ for protecting her son's innocence from knightly influence, an evaluation not offered by Chrétien or Wolfram von Eschenbach who rather imply criticism of the mother for artificially protecting her son from social reality. Upon first meeting such a knight, Peredur directly asks his mother what they are, to which she responds: "egylvon uy mab" (101, col. 118; "Angels, my son," (183). His immediate response is to reply, just as impetuously as in the continental versions, "yd afi yn agel ygýt ac vȳnt" (101, col. 118; "I will go as an angel along with them," 183). Here Owein wisely contracts a bargain with the youth, trading knowledge for knowledge, rather than becoming impatient and aggravated as in the *Conte*. Peredur's interview brings him back to his mother, where he informs her "Mam heb ef nýt egylȳon ȳ rei racco namȳn marchogȳon" (102, col. 119; "'Mother,' he said, 'those yonder are not angels, but knights,'" 184), before she falls down in a dead faint. After reviving, the resigned woman advises her departing son:

Ȳny gvelȳch eglȳs ? can dȳpater v2thi. Ogvelȳ vȳýt adiaut obȳd reit it v2thau. ac na bo ouybot adayoni ȳ rodi it. kȳmer tuhun ef. Ochȳvȳ diaspat ? dos v2thi. adiaspat

¹⁶ The Welsh tradition privileges both age and lineage, as indicated by the titles of many tales, such as *Branwyn Daughter of Llŷr*, *Manawydan Son of Llŷr*, *Math Son of Mathonwy*, *Gereint Son of Erbin* and others. This authority of the father often encompasses the deeds of the son.

¹⁷ *Mabinogion*, transl. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones. (London and Melbourne: Dent: Everyman's Library, 1986), "Introduction," xxvii. Subsequent translations from this volume will be given in the text.

¹⁸ See the useful introductory article on "Peredur," *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature*, ed. Jay Ruud (New York: Facts On File, 2006), 503–04.

¹⁹ Here I cite from *Historia Peredur vab Efrawg*. Introd. and English trans. by Meirion Pennar, with ill. by James Negus, and a facsimile of the Welsh text ed. by J. Gwenogvryn Evans (Felinfach, Lampeter, and Dyfed: Llanerch Publishers, 1991). Editor's note: Technically it is not possible to reproduce all the specific letters used in the original from 1907.

gvzeic anat diaspat oz byt. O gvely tlus tec ? kȳmer ti euo . a dȳzro titheu ȳ arall.
Ac o hinny clot a geffȳ. O gvely gvzeic tec ? gozdercha hi. Kȳn nȳth vȳnho gvellgvz
affenedigach ȳthuna no chȳnt (102, col. 119–20).

[Wherever thou seest a church, recite thy pater thereto. If thou see meat and drink, shouldst thou be in need thereof and it be not given thee of courtesy and good will, take it thyself. If thou hear an outcry, make towards it, and a woman's outcry above any cry in the world. If thou see a fair jewel, take it and give it to another, and thou shalt have fame thereby, 185].

This advice differs from the French version in being more self-protective. The countess now says nothing of his father, or of Peredur's background, nothing related to the Grail or a fisher king; but she cursorily offers salvific help for his body. Her last injunction, to ignore a given Lady's preference and make love to her against her will because it will enhance him—totally ignores the Lady's wishes or best interests. Coincidentally, he meets such a lady alone in her pavilion and abruptly informs her of his mother's instructions. While Chrétien's maiden vehemently protests, *Peredur's* agreeably consents to his every demand—for food and drink, her golden ring, her kisses—saying “kȳmer titheu eneit heb hi nȳt miui ae gvazasun itti . . . (103, col. 121; “Go then, chieftain . . . and God's welcome to thee . . . 'Tis not I that will begrudge it thee,” 185). She will come to rue those words. All actions here orchestrated by his mother's authority, even treatment of the Red Knight's assault on Gwenhwyfar, are depicted as occurring in a much speedier, even abrupt fashion, seemingly lacking in courtesy. In the Welsh tale, Peredur's ungainly arrival at Arthur's court evokes abuse: “Ac ar hȳnnȳ ȳ arganuot oz teulu a dechzeu ȳ dȳfalu a buzv lȳscon idau” (103, col. 122; “they began to make fun of him and throw sticks at him,” 187) for this courtly coterie disdain his lack of polish. Ceï especially abuses the youth harshly from his position of male authority. When the she-dwarf prophesies Ceï's punishment for abusing his power and authority, Ceï rudely kicks her down and orders Peredur to seek vengeance of the Red Knight. While disdaining Ceï's rudeness, Peredur obediently follows his experienced authority, happy to claim the red armor in the conflict, but also mindful of the retribution owed Ceï for abusing the dwarfs.

Now Peredur's adventures begin in earnest, and more quickly than in other romances, as he encounters two fishermen from whom he accepts hospitality—and more. The hoary-headed man sitting on brocaded cushions speaks with authoritative dignity, placing Peredur next to him by the blazing fire. After dinner, the venerable host asks Peredur if he knows well how to smite with a sword, and proceeds to show him, through his sons' expertise, as had Chrétien's Gornemant. With his successful execution of that “play,” Peredur is told a secret by the old man: “Ath ewȳthȳr titheu vzaut dȳ vam vȳsi. A chȳt ami ybȳdȳ ȳ wershon ȳn dȳscu moes amȳnut. Ȳmadau weithon aieith dȳ vam. Ami a uȳdaf athro it ac ath urdaf ȳn varchauc urdau” (106, col. 128; “And thy uncle, thy

mother's brother, am I. And thou shalt be with me this while, learning manners and etiquette. Leave be now thy mother's words, and I will be thy teacher and will ordain thee an ordained knight," 190–91). This displacement of his mother by his father-figure is a sort of maturation, or perhaps a change in the boy's needs. His first instruction is not in the masculine venery but in verbal politeness: his uncle insists: "kýt gwelych a vo ryued genhyt. nac amofyn ymdanau ony byd o uýbot y venegi it. nýt arnat ti y býd y kerýd namyn arnafi. kanys mi yssyd athzo it" (106, col. 128; "even though thou see what is strange to thee, ask not after it, unless there be such courtesy that thou be told of it. Not upon thee will the fault be, but upon me for I am thy teacher," 191). Such counsel from a well-meaning elder, however, may be detrimental when he is expected to ask rather than be told. This frustrated revelation lacks a magical vision, as presented in Chrétien's *Conte*.

When the newly instructed boy leaves the next day, he traverses a forest and a meadow to encounter another handsome hoary-headed man seated on a chair. Again, after dinner, he is asked if he knows how to smite with a sword, and again he retorts: "ýstyssul haýarn mauz oed yn llauz ýneuad amgyffret milu2 ymdanau" (107, col. 129; "Were I to receive instruction . . . I think I should know," 191), seemingly not realizing the repetition, or the similarity in instructive, but hoary, debilitated old men who call him nephew. As this uncle converses with the boy, the deferred Grail procession passes by, with nary a word about it from either. Two youths bearing a great spear with three streams of blood, all other bystanders who cried and lamented, and two maidens bearing a great salver with "llefein a dzýcyruerth agýmerth paub ýndunt hýt nat oed haud y neb y diodef" (107, col. 130; "a man's head on the salver, and blood in profusion around the head," 192) fail to interrupt their conversation. Soon, however, everyone shrieks and screams without prompting Peredur to ask the meaning of it all. No instruction or guidance in this matter was offered by this uncle, which leads to Peredur's doom. This version depicts the uncle making his good-byes in the morning, not leaving the youth to depart alone as does the *Conte*.

Next, deep in the forest, Peredur hears shrieking and sees a lady fruitlessly trying to place her husband's corpse onto a horse; this time he asks: "Dýwet výt chwaer heb ef pý diaspedein ýssýd arnat ti" (108, col. 131; "Say, sister, what shrieking is this of thine?" 193). Her knowledge and accusation startle him:

Pý ham heb ef y býdun ýscymmun i. Am dý vot ýn achau5 ý lad dý vam. kanys pan gýchwýnneist ti oe hanuod y ýmdeith ý llamvys guayv ýndi hitheu ac o hýnný ý bu varu. Ac am dýuot ýn achau5 oe hagheu ýd uýt ýn ýscýmun, Ar co2r ar co2res aweleist ti ýn lls arthur. co2r dý tat ti ath vam oed hunnu (108, col. 131).

[T]hou are the cause of thy mother's death. For when thou didst set out against her will, pain leapt within her, and of that she died. And inasmuch as thou art the cause of her death, thou art accursed. And the dwarf and the she-dwarf thou sawest in Arthur's court that was the dwarf of thy father and thy mother, 193].

This revelation of his foster-sister instructs, shocks and propels Peredur into action—to bury her husband and accept familial obligations: avenge his murder by demanding the murderer marry and care for his now-widowed sister. While young Peredur understands his duty, only his elders know familial relationships and Grail protocol; he must rely on them to reveal his place in the world.

At Peredur's next adventure at the castle of starving and threadbare maidens, he fails to ask the reason for their decrepit condition; this default requires the victims to force one of their number to barter herself for his protection. Now her tears force him to ask, and it is incumbent upon her to tell Peredur what he should have asked before. She reveals:

Vyn tat I bicoed yllŷs hon. ar iarllaeth ozeu yn ybŷt ydanei. Sef yd oed mab iarll arall ym erchi inheu ym tat. Nŷt aun inheu om bod idau ef. nŷ rodei vŷn tat inheu om hanuod nac idau nac y neb. ac nŷt oed oplant ym tat namŷn mihun. Aguedŷ maru vŷn tat? ydŷguŷduŷs ykŷfoeth ym llau inheu. Huŷrach ymŷnnun i efo ŷna no chŷnt. Sef aozuc ŷnteu rŷselu arnasi agozescŷn vŷg kŷsoeth namŷn ŷr vn tŷ hunn. A rac dahed y guŷr aweleisti bzodŷr maeth imi. Achadarnhet ŷtŷ nŷ cheit bŷtharnam tra barahei uuŷt allŷn. a hŷnnŷ rŷderŷv. namŷn mal yd oed ymanachsŷeu aweleisti ŷn an pozthi herwŷd bot ŷn rŷd udunt vŷ ŷwlat ar kŷfoeth. Ac weithon nŷt oes udunt vŷneu nabuŷt nallyn. Ac nŷt oes oet bellach auozŷ ŷnŷ del ŷr iarll ae holl allu am pen ŷ lle hun (110, col. 135).

[My father owned this court, and the best earldom in the world under it. Now there was a son of another earl asking me of my father. I would not go to him of my own free will, nor would my father give me against my will to him or any one else. And my father had no children save me. And after my father's death the dominion fell into my hand. Still less eager was I then to have him than before. So he made war on me and conquered my dominion save for this one house . . . And there is no respite beyond tomorrow before the earl comes with all his power against this place, 195–96].

No one needs to tell the now-cognizant Peredur he must defend her honor and castle from the interloper. He has learned a lesson: to ask the identity of three usurping knights after mastering them to extract a bargain for the maiden's freedom. Meeting the wretched lady from whom he stole provisions and a ring, he again asks from whence she comes, now realizing that people have a story which must be revealed. After subduing the "Proud One of the Clearing," he proceeds to a castle controlled by the nine witches of *Caer Loyw*, whom he brings to Witches' court for overrunning that castle. After a well-needed respite, a peaceful night with a wise hermit, he must engage with Arthur's retinue, and seek an audience with him. Unlike the blustering *Cei*, who yells "*Pan doi ti vnben*" (117, 150; "Whence comest thou, Chieftan?," 206), the seasoned *Gwalchmei* knows how to reach Peredur, meditating on his beloved, with mannerly speech. Even hot-tempered *Cei* acknowledges the wisdom of age and power of words, noting "*Ma*

awýdun na bydei reit ý walchemei ýmlad ar marchauc. Adirýfed ýu idau kassel clot. Muý awna ef oe eireu tec no nini o nerth an harueu" (114, col. 144; "I knew Gwalchmei would not need to fight with the knight. Nor is it to be wondered that he has won renown. He does more with his fair words than we by dint of our arms," 202). Unfortunately Peredur is not present to hear this admission.

Peredur's next adventure, among big black huts, requires he free a lion before finding the "weirglaud v2th ý kastell [ble] ef awelei gur lluyt mav2 yn eisted" (115, col. 146; "meadow by the castle [where] he could see a big grey-headed man," 203). Sitting beside him at table is an aged woman next to the grey-headed man and a maiden gazing upon Peredur who appears sad. Peredur is learning, for he asks the compassionate words, "why are you sad?" She prophetically responds that loving him best of all men, it grieves her that such a noble youth will meet his doom the next day. Although she is not aged, she possesses the wisdom of the elderly, and sits among them. She reports that the black huts house giants, her father's vassals who at his command will rise up and slay him the next day. This answer saves his life, for Peredur wisely prepares: he keeps his weapons at hand while he sleeps, and arms himself in the morrow. Despite pleas from both young and aged women, the lord refuses to spare Peredur's life during battle. And so he fights the host as long as the lord denies him mercy and ends the conflict. Ultimately, with no more defense, the lord seeks mercy of Peredur the conquerer. Although the French Perceval is instructed by Gornemant to offer mercy to his defeated victims, no elderly guide teaches Peredur the same principles. Here, the wiser and more useful guides are an old woman and young maiden, but because the old man's authority supercedes theirs, a host of people are killed. The unusual bearers of truth are female, but lacking power, they cannot save the heirs.

Next, Peredur encounters a serpent lying on a ring of gold around a poor dwelling, which he overcomes with prowess to claim the gold ring. But when the lad then encounters a taunting Cei, silence is required. Peredur must not speak to him lest he break his oath of silence until he repays Cei for hurting the dwarf and Gwenhwyfar. To punish that silence, Cei pierced his thigh-bone, necessitating Gwalchmei's healing assistance. At the next castle, although three maidens warn Peredur of their big, black, one-eyed father's spite, he boldly insists he will remain. When a maiden asks for mercy on Peredur's behalf, her father grants it—but only for one night. The lad challenges him: "Ac ýna ýdywaut [Peredur] gvedý juruýscav. Ryfed ýu genhyf kadarnet ý dýwedý ti dý vot?" (119, col. 153; "And then, Peredur, having grown tipsy, said to the black man, 'I marvel how exceedingly mighty thou reckonest thou art. Who put out thine eye?'," 208). Peredur has not failed to ask the question, but he did so with bitterness and rage, not kindness and charity. And so he must pay—as much as if he had failed to ask the expected question at the Grail procession. The boy still knows no discretion. Angrily the man explains his custom: to slay anyone who asks that question. The

maiden admits that “efo ofered abzvyfked a meddau parthet ac attat ti. K ywira  geir adywedesti g nhew ac aedeweist v zh fi” (119, col. 153; “he spoke foolish things regarding thee, in drunkenness and elation,” 208). The next day, however, his prowess overcomes the man, allowing the stubborn Peredur to ask the questions again before giving quarter. Thus the Black Oppressor reveals the Black Worm of the Dolorous Mound put his eye out; in his tail, the Worm secrets a jewel which gives the holder as much gold as desired. Leaping upon this news, Peredur plans to seek the jewel, believing himself invincible. But first the big man uses words unwisely to curse him, saying “Can buost ozmes  ng h t a h nn : Mi awnaf na b ch byth bellach. Ae lad awnaeth pe[re]dur idau” (120, col. 155; “Since thou hast been a plague so long, I shall bring it about that thou wilt never be such henceforth.’ And Peredur slew him,” 210). The youth has learned the obstacles he must endure from the Black Oppressor’s experience, but spitefully ends the man’s life for his threats.

The next impediments prove no easier to surmount. At the court of the Sons of the King of Suffering, women greet him; soon he notices a horse running with a corpse in its saddle. After a maiden removes it, washes it, and anoints it with ointment, the corpse magically revives, a process repeated often to Peredur’s amazement. When he politely inquires, he is told an Addanc in a cave slays these men each day. He may not accompany them, for these experienced men warn him “Pei lledi ti  no? n t oed it ath wnelei  n u v d achef n” (120, col. 156; “Wert thou to be slain there, thou wouldst have none who might make thee alive again,” 210–11). Musing about the task, Peredur meets a stunning woman who offers a bargain: if he were to love her best of women, she would provide a magic stone to make the Addanc visible; Peredur might then use his magic poisoned spear, avoiding all deaths. This experienced woman from India offers the same power, knowledge, and authority in the magic stone as her male counterparts: a fitting guide for the youth. Happily accepting, Peredur approaches the Addanc’s cave. Magic stone in one hand and spear in the other, he decapitates the Addanc to end the country’s curse. With the help of an older capable woman, Peredur succeeds. Through her words and magical gift, he overcomes this magical force.

One day at Arthur’s court an ugly Cundrie-figure-of-a-woman enters, an unlikely candidate to instruct Peredur with her authority and power. But after greeting all but Peredur, she accuses him of negligence, for his sins are still following him:

Pan doethost  l s   b enhin cloff a phan weleist  no   mac    n du  n  gua   llifeit. Ac o vlaen  gua   daf n owaet. Ah nnu  n red c  n ra ad r h t  n du n   mac  . Ac enr fedodeu ereill heu t a weleist  no. Ac n  of  neisti eu h st r nac eu hachaus. A phei asgof nnut. iech t a gaff i  brenhin. Ae g  foeth n heduch. A bellach b v dreu ac  mladeu a cholli marchog n. Ac adau gu aged  n wedu. Arianed  n dioss mdeith a h nn  oll oth achau ti (125, col. 166).

[When thou camest to the court of the Lame King, and when thou sawest there the squire bearing the sharpened spear and from the tip of the spear a drop of blood, and that running as it were a torrent . . . And other marvels besides thou sawest there, but thou didst not ask after their meaning nor the cause of them. And hadst thou so asked, the king would have had health and his kingdom in peace. But henceforth strife and battle, and the loss of knights, and women left widowed, and maidens without succor, and that al because of thee (218)].

The hag concludes her tirade with a taunting invitation to earn fame by saving a besieged maiden, which many then seek out; but Peredur proclaims “*Mŷn vŷg cret nŷ chŷscaf hun lonŷd nes gŷvŷbot chwedŷl ac ŷstŷr ŷguavŷu a dŷwaut ŷ vozvŷn du ŷmdanau*” (126, col. 167; “By my faith, I will not sleep in peace till I know the story and the meaning of the spear the black maiden told of,” 218). This elderly crone’s information is thus doubly effective, spurring some knights to greater fame, and Peredur to resolving his unfinished grail business. Seeking the black maiden, he instead finds a priest who scolds him for not respecting Good Friday. The humbled Peredur dismounts, and travels on foot to find the priest’s castle and guidance to learn the Grail answers. What he learns here the author fails to tell, but soon he is off to the Castle of Wonders. On his way, a high-ranking man sends Peredur to his castle to dine with his laughing daughter. His implicit advice is not useful to the lad. After a jealous youth counsels the King to jail Peredur (to prevent him from seducing the maid), and two earls threaten the King, the daughter frees Peredur from jail to fight for that King. Although the King’s reward is handsome, Peredur refuses it and his daughter, for Peredur seeks the Castle of Wonders. This elderly man offers no solutions to the young knight, and so he moves on.

When the youth enters the Castle of Wonders, he foolishly throws the *gwyddbwyll* game board into the lake because the wrong side won—and must pay for this rashness. To his chagrin, the black maiden enters, spouting “*Nŷ bo graessav duv v2thŷt. Mŷnŷchach it wneuthur d2vc no da*” (130, col. 175; “God’s welcome be not to thee. Thou dost oftener harm than good,” 224). To retrieve the board, the youth must kill the old black man laying waste at the Empress’ dominion at Castle Yabidinongŷl with the guidance of the wise but ugly maid who knows all. Although Peredur wins the match, he accepts pleas for mercy and wisely does not slay the old man, Peredur reaches some accommodation when he wanders into the Castle of Wonders and through the open door sees Gwalchmai sitting next to the old, lame, grey-haired man. When he is seated on the other side, he finds some clarification as the kneeling yellow-haired youth explains:

Arglŷvd heb ŷguvas mi adeuthum ŷn rith ŷ vozvŷn du ŷlŷs arthur. Aphan vŷrŷeist ŷclau2. Aphan lediest ŷ gv2 du o ŷspidinongŷl. Aphan ledeist ŷ karu. Aphan uuost ŷn ŷmlad ar gv2 du or llech. Ami a deuthum ar pen ŷn waedlŷt ar ŷ dŷscŷl. Ac ar guaŷv auod ŷffrut waet o2 pen hŷt ŷ du2n ar hŷt ŷguavŷu. Ath gefŷnderu biowed ŷ pen. A

guidonot kaer loyw ae lladassei. Ac vȳnt aglossassat dȳ ewythy. Ath gefȳnderu vȳf inhw. Adarogan ȳu itti dial hȳnnȳ (131, col. 177–78).

[I came in the guise of the black maiden to Arthur's court, and when thou didst throw away the board, and when thou slewest the black man from Ysbidinongyl, and when thou slewest the stag, and when thou didst fight against the black man of the slab; and I came with the head all bloody on the salver, and with the spear that had the stream of blood from its tip to the handgrip along the spear. And the head was thy cousin's and it was the witches of Caer Loyw that had slain him. And 'twas they that lamed thy uncle. And thy cousin am I, and it is prophesied that thou wilt avenge that, 226].

Thus, Peredur's shape-shifting cousin, acting as old men, old women, and occasionally as youth, has taught the words of wisdom the boy has gradually assimilated. It is yet for him to determine when his guides are truthful or deceptive, and how to interpret their messages in a given context. Accompanied by the elder Gwalchmei, Peredur has progressed to a place in the Grail tableau only because he has internalized those words of wisdom from his elderly familial guides.

Wolfram von Eschenbach

Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* begins a generation before the hero's birth when King Galoes wisely shares his father Gandin's wealth with his brother Gahmuret, rather than exercising his right of primogeniture to control all family property. Eschenbach esteems lineage, evidenced by the extensive family history preceding his primary tale. Prior sages respected in their domain stand behind the Grail seekers, and are acknowledged as the context for their quest. Living elderly relatives also play significant roles: as participants within the Grail mystery itself, instructors of the Grail secrets, and revealers of the moral and ethical responsibilities of the young. His unique background makes Parzival the only hero advantaged by another instructive source: his unbaptized, but distinctly moral brother, Feirefiz. As Murphy notes, this slightly older master of warfare "is, baptism or no, as a human being, a gem of the purest sort, as is demonstrated not only by his conduct but also by the fact that he is covered with gemstones."²⁰ The brothers intermittently learn and teach each other proper modes of behavior.

However, first young Parzival most urgently needs mature guidance and instruction because his fearful mother Herzelayde, attempting to protect him from his father's fate, has restricted his world; but keeping him innocent also means keeping him uneducated, unprepared to fight, and unsocialized. The very-present

²⁰ G. Ronald Murphy, S. J., *Gemstones of Paradise*, 119.

narrator points out the boy's strength with amazement, thus highlighting his educational deficiencies even more. Hearing hoof-beats, the lad speculates:

"wan wolt et nu der tiuvel komn
mit grimme zorneclîche!
den bestiende ich sicherlîche.
mîn muoter freisen von im sagt:
ich wæne ir ellen sî verzagt."²¹

[“If only the Devil would come in all his terrible fierceness, I would stand up to him for sure. My mother tells me dreadful tales about him. I suppose she has lost her courage.”²²]

The sight of the knights brings the boy to his knees in prayer, assuming the strong Karnahkarnanz is God himself. Minimal instruction from this idealized icon begins Parzival's military education. When Herzeloide finds her son has learned the secrets she had kept from him, she grows agitated; agreeing to provide him a horse, she makes it the worst nag possible, still battling to protect him, and thus prevents his death. She reasons:

"der liute vil bî spotte sint.
tôren kleider sol mîn kint
ob sîme liechten lîbe tragn.
wirt er geroufet unt geslagn,
sô kumt er mir her wider wol." (126, 25–29)

[“People are much given to mockery,” she continued in her thoughts. “My child shall wear fool's clothing over his white skin. Then, if he is roughly handled, he will surely come back to me,” 75].

Fearing his death in battle, she is no reliable guide for his maturation since her agenda is to keep him ignorant and safe. Despite her protective manipulation, she would instruct him:

dune solt niht hinnen kêren,
ich wil dich list ê lêren.
an ungebanten strâzen
soltu tunkel fürte lâzen:
die sîhte und lûter sîn,
dâ solte al balde rîten in.

²¹ Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, ed. Karl Lachmann. 6th ed. Transl. Peter Knecht, Introd. Bernd Schirok (Berlin und New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 120, 18–22. Subsequent references to this work will be given in the text (page, followed by verse numbers). It cannot be the purpose of this paper to review the entire, very extensive history of Wolfram research, but see Joachim Bumke, *Wolfram von Eschenbach*. 8th compl. rev. ed. Sammlung Metzler, 36 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2004).

²² Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, A. T. Hatto, transl. (1980; New York, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 72. Subsequent translations from this volume will be given in the text.

du solt dich site nieten,
 der werlde grüezen bieten.
 Op dich ein grâ wîse man
 zuht wil lêrn als er wol kan,
 dem soltu gerne volgen,
 und wis im niht erbolgen.
 sun, lâ dir bevolhen sîn,
 swa du guotes wîbes vingerlîn
 mügest erwerben unt ir gruoz,
 daz nim: ez tuot dir kumbers buoz.
 du solt zir kusse gâhen
 und ir lîp vast umbevâhen:
 daz gît gelücke und hōhen muot,
 op si kiusche ist unde guot (127, 13–30 and 128, 1–2).

[You must not go before I have taught you some sense. When riding across country, avoid murky fords. Where they are clear and shallow trot in briskly. Make it your custom to greet all and sundry. If a wise grey-haired man offers to teach you good manners as he would well know how, do as he says with a will, do not fly into a passion . . . Wherever you can win a lady's ring and greeting, take it—it will rid you of the dumps. Waste no time, but kiss and embrace her. It will bring you good fortune and raise your spirits, granted she be chaste and good, 75].

And lastly, she tells him the family's political situation—that Lahelin has stolen his lands and must be avenged. Wolfram immediately reveals her death, and lauds her value to her son:

sus fuor die lōnes bernden vart
 ein wurzel der güete
 und ein stam der diemüete.
 ôwê daz wir nu niht enhân
 ir sippe unz an den eilften spân! (128, 26–30)

[“Thus did a root of virtue, stem of humility, go the way that brings reward. Alas, that we no longer have her kindred with us to the eleventh remove!” 76].

Before long the escaping boy finds the sleeping Jeschute in an ornate pavilion; Wolfram paints her most erotically—translucent red mouth, parted lips, gleaming close-set teeth, slender and white: “an ir was künste niht vermiten: / got selbe worht ir süezen lîp” (130, 22–23; “No art was lacking there since God had fashioned her sweet body” (76)). But it is the ring on her finger that draws the boy: when he would steal it, the Duchess struggles. However

dô dâhter an die muoter sîn:
 diu riet an wîbes vingerlîn.
 ouch spranc der knappe wol getân
 von dem teppiche an daz bette sân (130, 29–30 and 131, 1–2)

[“the handsome lad was thinking of his mother and how she had told him to capture women’s rings—and so he had leapt from the carpet straight upon the couch!,” 77].

A humorous tone, both in its excesses and absurdities, lacking in the other romances, marks this version. The Duchess, no shrinking violet, vehemently but unsuccessfully repulses the lad’s mouth and advances. When he complains of hunger, she indignantly replies: “ir solt mîn ezzen nieht” (131, 24; “Don’t eat me,” 77), and shows him the food. His parting words are “got hüete dîn: / alsus riet mir diu muoter mîn” (132, 23–24; “God be with you—That’s what my mother told me,” 77; having little socialization upon which to rely, he must follow her general, even incorrect advice. Unbeknownst to any of them, Jeschute’s husband Orilus, killer of Parzival’s uncle King Galoes, is inadvertently revenged. The consistently intrusive narrator critically comments on his behavior this way:

het er gelernt sîns vater site,
die werdecliche im wonte mite,
diu bukeel wære gehurtet baz,
da diu herzoginne al eine saz. (139, 15–18)

[“Had he learnt his father’s noble ways, which remained with him all his life, the tilting would have been more on the mark, back there where the Duchess had sat all alone!,” 80].

When Parzival encounters Lady Sigune and her dead husband, recalling his mother’s injunction to speak to all, he does so—but with an irrational question “wer gap iun ritter wunden?” (138, 30; “Who gave you that wounded knight?,” 80). The gentle Sigune thanks him for his pity, takes no offense at his silly question, and informs him of his lineage: that his name means Pierce-through-the heart, she is his aunt, he is an Angevin and Waleis born of Kanovoleis, and is king of Norgals and Kingrivals. She continues to relate his history, enemies, and obligations to her “lieber neve guoter” (141, 14; “dear, kind cousin,” 81). Interestingly, she finally repeats his mother’s protective inclination and behavior:

dô was im gein dem strîte gâch.
si wîste in unrehte nâch:
si vorht daz er den lîp verlûr
unt daz si grœzeren schaden kûr.
eine strâze er dô gevienc. (141, 29–30 and 142, 1–3)

[“He was all impatient to go and fight, but she gave him the wrong direction, fearing he would be killed and she take great harm. He took a broad, paved road,” 82].

Although not greatly older than he, Sigune, possessing the experience and knowledge of a much more mature person, clearly represents cultural authority which shapes his future. Traveling through the countryside, the lad keeps his mother’s memory and advice, for

swer im widergienc od widerreit,
 ez wære rittr od koufman,
 die selben gruofter alle sîn,
 und jach, ez wær sîn muoter rât.
 diu gabn ouch âne missetât. (142, 6–10)

[“Whoever came walking or riding by, whether knight or merchant, he promptly gave all a greeting, declaring his mother had said he should. Nor had she erred in giving him this counsel,” 82].

As he encounters more of the world, and recognizes its complexity, Parzival becomes more open to others’ suggestions. The helpful fisherman would part with him as they enter Nantes, saying:

... “kint, got hüete dîn.
 nu sich, dort soltu rîten in.”
 dô sprach der knappe an witzen laz
 “du solt mich wîsen fûrbaz.” (144, 9–12)

[“‘God be with you, child . . . Look, that’s where you ride in.’ ‘Do guide me further,’ replied the backward youth,” 83].

The young man actively prefers guidance here in a world of which he knows little.

Unlike other versions, Wolfram’s presentation of Parzival’s first meeting with the Red Knight is amiable, polite, and non-confrontational. But when Parzival returns, having apologized for the Red Knight’s wine-spilling, learning of the court’s workings, and asking for his armor, their conflict leads to Ither’s death. His encounter with the court is facilitated by the young page Iwanet, who points out Arthur and later shows him the way to unleash the Red Knight from his armor. Further, he advises him of social and dress customs, despite Parzival’s reluctance to learn:

Iwânet sprach “diu ribbalîn
 sulen niht underem îsern sîn:
 du solt nu tragen ritters kleit.”
 diu rede was Parzivâle leit:
 Dô sprach der knappe guoter
 “swaz mir gap mîn muoter,
 des sol vil wênic von mir komn,
 ez gê ze schaden odr ze fromn.” (156, 25–30 and 157, 1–2)

[Iwanet said: “Your buskins ought not to stay beneath your armor. From now on you must wear only knightly attire.” This did not please Parzival at all. “Nothing my mother gave me shall ever leave my body,” said the good lad, “for better or for worse,” 89].

Iwanet, despite his youth, also shows Parzival how to draw a sword, maneuver behind a shield, watch for a change to harm the enemy, never flee, and bury the victim with decorum. The irascible Keie suggests that Arthur unleash Parzival on the goblet-stealing villain for the ladies' amusement. The narrator comments: "sît do er sich paz versan, / ungerne het erz dô getân" (161, 7–8; "Later, on reaching years of discretion, Parzival wished he had not (murdered Ither)," 91). This evidence of his maturity is reassuring after such a killing.

Meeting and answering Prince Gurnemanz,

"sus antwurt im dô Parzivâl
uz tumben witzen sunder twâl.
'mich pat mîn muoter nemen rât
ze dem der grâwe locke hât.
dâ wil ich iu dienen nâch,
sît mir mîn muoter des verjach." (162, 27–30 and 163, 1–2)

[“Prompted by youthful ignorance, Parzival was quick with his response: ‘My mother asked me to seek advice of a man whose locks were grey. I will serve you in return, seeing my mother said so,’” 92].

This conflation of his maternal past and paternal present begins Parzival's pivotal growth into manhood. The old Prince accuses Parzival of speaking like a child, always talking of his mother, and offers much-needed counsel—ethical, practical, and military:

ir sult niemer iuch verschemn.
verschamter lîp, waz touc der mêr? . . .
lât iweren willen des bewart,
iuch sol erbarmen nôtec her:
gein des kumber sît ze wer
mit milte und mit güete:
vlîzet iuch diemüete . . .
Ir sult bescheidenliche
sin arm unde rîche . . .
gebt rehter mâze ir orden . . .
entseben unde drâhen; . . .
lât derbârme bî der vrâvel sîn.
sus tuot mir râtes volge schîn.
an swem ir strîtes sicherheit
bezalt, ern hab iu sölhiu leit
getân diu herzen kumber wesn,
die nemt, und lâzet in genesn . . .
des nement wîbes ougen war.
Sît manlîch und wol gemuot:
daz ist ze werdem prîse guot.
und lât iu liep sîn diu wîp;

daz tiwert junges mannes lîp. (170, 16–17, 24–28; 171, 7–8, 13,
23, 25–30; 172, 6–10)

[“You must never lose your sense of shame. If one is past all shame what is one fit for? . . . compassionate the needy, ward off their distress with kindness and generosity. Praise humility . . . You must be rich and poor with discretion . . . Give moderation its due. It is clear to me that you need counsel. Now have done with unformed was! Do not ask many questions. Yet if someone has a mind to sift you with words, you should not hold back a considered answer that keeps straight to the point. . . . Temper daring with mercy . . . When you have won a man’s submission in battle, accept it and let him live, unless he had done you mortal wrong. . . Be manly and cheerful: it will enhance your reputation. Hold the ladies in high esteem: that heightens a young man’s worth . . . There is more for you to learn of knightly ways.” He taught his guest how to throw his mount from the gallop to full tilt . . . how to lower his lance to correct angle and cover himself with his shield against his opponent’s thrust—“Like this, allow me!” he said. In this way Gurnemanz kept him from unmannerliness better than the pliant rod that cuts the skin of wanton boys,” 95, 96, 97].

This is the epitome of mature wisdom. Murphy usefully compares Chrétien and Wolfram’s treatment of the elderly teacher, noting:

The four instructions of Chrétien’s Gornemant are paralleled by four further teachings of Wolfram’s Gurnemanz. First: let mercy go along with daring, let the defeated man live Second parallel principle: do not ask too many questions. Third parallel question: let women be precious to you ; be loyal to them; and a wholesome note: be cheerful. Fourth, here there is no parallel mention by Wolfram of churchgoing in general—Wolfram seems to prefer realizing what occurs in church: Parzival has just been instructed while at mass. The instruction continues: never lose your sense of shame, because if you have no sense of honor, hell awaits. Furthermore, have compassion on the needy and protect them; treat rich and poor equally; stay out of quarrels among the boorish.²³

With politeness and respect, the sagacious old Prince provides the words and actions by which to live, for from them Parzival becomes expert in war, competent in social intercourse, successful and gentlemanly in society. His judicious response to Gurnemanz reveals his progress:

. . . sîne tochter bat er komn
ze tische: alsus hân ichz vernomn.
do er die maget komen sach,
nu høert vie der wirt sprach
ze der schœnen Lîâzen. (175, 21–25)

²³ G. Ronald Murphy, S. J., *Gemstone of Paradise*, 152.

["I have not yet arrived at years of discretion. But if ever I win fame as a knight such as would entitle me to sue for love, I shall ask you to give me Liaze, the pretty girl your daughter," 99]

Nor does he forget the advice of the wise old man in dealing with beautiful young women:

sîn manlich zuht was im sô ganz,
sît in der werde Gurnamanz
von sîner tumpheit geschiet
unde im vrâgen widerriet,
ez enwære bescheidenlîche,
bî der kûneginne rîche
saz sîn munt gar âne wort,
nâhe aldâ, niht verre dort. (188, 15–22)

["His self-command was so entire since Gurnemanz had rid him of his folly and forbidden him to ask questions—sensible ones excepted—that he sat beside the puissant Queen without a word falling from his lips," 104].

The narrator regards the old man as a legitimate source of valid information, and a useful guide for educating a youth. That knowledge is translated into poise, action, as well as intellectual theory, allowing Parzival comfort and ease in his circumstances. Later Parzival ruminates "er dâhte 'mir riet Gurnamanz / mit grôzen triwen âne schranz, / ich solte vil gevârâgen niht'" (239, 11–13; "'Gurnemanz advised me with perfect sincerity against asking too many questions,' he thought," 127), and bides his time, relying on a reputable man; Parzival fails to realize his words are inappropriate for this situation. The narrator mourns

ôwê daz er niht vrâgte dô!
des pin ich für in noch unvrô.
wan do erz enpfîenc in sîne hant,
dô was er vrâgens mit ermant.
och riwet mich sîn sûezer wirt,
den ungenande niht verbirt,
des im von vrâgn nu wære rât.
genouc man dâ gegeben hât:
dies pflâgen, die griffenz an,
si truognz gerûste wider dan. (240, 3–12)

["Alas that he asked no Question then! Even now I am cast down on his account! For when he was given the sword it was to prompt him to ask a Question! I mourn too for his gentle host, who is dogged by misfortune from on high of which he could be rid by a Question," 127].

The elderly guide is not blamed for Parzival's error, and the elderly victim is pitied, revealing the author's partiality to the older gentlemen. Interestingly, a woman, Repanse de Schoye, explains the host's suffering, God's terrible sign, and

accuses Parzival of not alleviating his pain. The wise old hermit instructs the knight in his religious duties on Good Friday, revealing to Parzival his lack of direction and unhappiness, thus furthering his growth in another realm. Parzival is like a sponge, absorbing lessons from sages around him, often older relatives with experience and wisdom.²⁴ The youth repents when he recognizes his prior errors, omissions, murders, repentance and compensation. The process of reformation is neither rapid nor easy, but Wolfram understands the nature of youth, the nature of *elde*, and the vital connection between them. His *Parzival* honors the experience of the aged, providing them an essential role in both educating the youthful Parzival and restoring the land, here through the powerful Grail legend.²⁵

Thomas Malory

Eugene Vinaver's edition²⁶ of Thomas Malory's 116-page *Tale of the Sankreal Briefly Drawn Out of French* is in fact extensive. Now "the adventure of the Sankreall [shall] begynne, that ys called the holy vessell" (629) with a preliminary procession of twelve nuns who, having nurtured him, bring "thys chylde [Galahad] . . . thys yonge squyer and [all] saw hym semely and demure as a dove, with all maner of goode fetures, that [Launcelot] wende of hys ayge never to have seene so fayre a fourme of a man" (627). In this precursor to the Grail procession, the nuns wish him a better life of chivalry, but weep at their loss, and his youth—repeatedly emphasized. Shortly after Galahad departs for his own adventures, he returns to the court in disguise: in red arms, delivered by "a good olde man, an awnciente, clothed all in whyght" (630) who introduces him as "a yonge knyght the whych ys of kynges lynage and of the knyrede of Joseph of Aramathy, whereby the mervayles of this courte and of stronge realmys shall be fully comlevysshed" (630). After leading the youth to his pre-ordained "Syge Perelous," the sage is graciously dismissed with "Now may ye, sir, go youre way, for well have ye done in that that ye were commaunded" (631). He asks to be commended to his

²⁴ A jarring discrepancy emerges, however, in the depiction of the old Titirel, mentioned both in Wolfram's *Parzival* and his *Titirel*. See the critical examination of this figure by Rasma Laszda in her contribution to this volume.

²⁵ This can also be read, as Albrecht Classen has suggested (*Verzweiflung und Hoffnung: Die Suche nach der kommunikativen Gemeinschaft in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters*. Beihefte zur Mediaevistik, 1 [Frankfurt a. M., Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 2002], 221–78), as a clear message to pay close attention to the needs of human society to pursue communicative strategies; mankind's survival is dependent on the establishment of a harmonious communicative community.

²⁶ *The Works of Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugene Vinaver (1954; London, New York, and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1964), 625–741. Subsequent references to this edition will be given in the text.

grandfaher Pelles and lord Pecchere, his wise forebears, reiterating their value to him. In each case, older nurturers provide for younger producers, whom they see as their responsibility. Thus, sages share responsibility for redemption of the realm, both directly, with the youth's actions, and indirectly, in their physical, mental, and emotional facilitation of the young man's deeds to save yet another old man. This cyclic pattern demands wisdom be taught to the young, who must use it to save yet another sage, and hence the country. Malory posits several seekers—Percivale, Launcelot, Gawain, Bors, and Galahad, each treated separately, not one character searching for the Grail in his unique path; all benefit from the wisdom of varied elderly gentlemen and clergy, but only one succeeds.

Most interesting in this version, however, is Galahad's awareness of the quest and his responsibility to understand and resolve it. After pulling the enigmatic sword from the stone which others failed to do, he brings an empty scabbard, expecting to claim this sword. Further, he knows the background of the "dolerous stroke that Balyn gaff unto kynge Pelles, the whych ys nat yett hole, nor naught shall be tyll that I hele hym" (632). The aura of mystery is undiminished by the quest's widespread notoriety. Malory's Grail procession is unique in that its bearers and the vessel itself are invisible: "there was none that myght se it nother whom that bare hit" (634; the knights know its location only by its fragrance, its white Samnite covering, and its enigmatic disappearance after feeding the company. But the vision inspires the knights' Quest with the wise old hermit Nacien's instructions to abjure their paramours. The Grail rules are thus articulated by an elderly man leading the seekers to success; without his counsel, their mission would fail.

Lancelot's revealing encounter with the hermit lays bare his sin, his presumption "to take uppon you in dedely synne for to be in Hys presence" (655), and the reason for his ultimate failure. Only through the wise hermit's awakening of Lancelot's conscience can he be forgiven. Similarly, Percivale's reclusive aunt teaches him his past deeds, his mother's death, and Galahad's location. During their quest, Gawayne and Ector dreamed symbolically pertinent dreams which the hermit Nacien explicates: the fair meadow means the round Table, and humility and patience; the bulls are the members, white betokens the maids Galahad and Percivale—symbolism is the means of teaching courtly behavior. Another tells Gawayne "thou were better to be counceyled" (686)—instructed in the Grail search. Bors learns who will attain the quest: "wyte you welles there shall none attayne hit but by clennes, that ys pure confession" (686; he is to lie on no bed but the floor, nor eat until sitting at the Grail table, and witnessed a host of symbols. A host of experienced sages thus counsel the many Grail knights.

Unlike the spatially and temporally bound procession and discussion within *Parzival's* Grail castle, Malory's "procession" is spatially and temporally open, external rather than within a single castle, existing over time, and encompassing

not one, but some 150 knights. Parzival's single failure is repeated by Bagdemagus and others. The magic color remains white, perhaps for purity; the challenge begins with the safe wearing of the white shield embossed with a red cross hanging in the white Abbey. First Bagdemagus usurps the shield, but two miles away in "a fayre valey before an ermytayge" he unsuccessfully contends with a knight "in whyte armour, horse and all" (639) for its possession. The knight rebukes him: "Knight, thou hast done thyselff grete foly, for thys shylde ought not to be borne but by hym that shall have no pere that lyvith" (639). He then instructs the shield be brought to its rightful bearer, Sir Galahad, who continues the procession alone. The magic shield, he learns, was made by Joseph of Arimathea for his convert Sir Evelake; once "in the batayle there was a clothe sette afore the shylde, and when [Evekale] was in the grettist perell he lett put away the cloth, and than hys enemyes saw a vigoure of a man on the crosse, wherethorow they all were discomfite" (641). Miracles followed. On his deathbed, Joseph prophecied that only Galahad, the last of his line, shall be worthy of the shield.

Galahad's next Grail trial is to remove the hermitage cemetery tombstone from whence emerged a foul odor and horrendous-looking fiend: a false Christian long dead, and symbol of man's wickedness, whom he expelled from the hallowed ground. Not the wisdom of old men, but Galahad's ancestry from them, saves him from harm and failure. The Grail procession continues with the newly dubbed knight, Syr Melyas de Lyle, defending the crown he has taken from a lodge. Although sorely wounded by the crown's defender, Galahad arrives to challenge and reclaim the crown; but an old monk takes seven weeks to cure the dangerously ill Melyas. That monk possesses the wisdom of the aged and reveals that Melyas failed because he was covetous and proud.

Now praying at a seemingly deserted altar, Galahad encounters his next trial: a voice orders him to end the evil custom at the Castle of Maidens. At the entrance, first "a man of grete ayge," then seven maidens, and finally seven knights advise he not enter this cursed castle without pity, for "all hardynes and myschyff ys therein" (647). But the persistent Galahad refuses their warning, and miraculously defeats them all. His reward from "an olde man clothyd in relygyous clothinge" (648) is the key to the castle, furthering his pilgrimage to Sankreale. But breaking of the evil custom demands renewing the old custom, announced by Galahad's blowing of the gold-bound ivory horn heard two miles away. Seven years hence, the old duke's daughter condemned her father's and brother's murders and prophecied one who would end their imprisonment; but meanwhile all who passed were confined or slaughtered until Galahad ended the evil custom.

Gawayne, Gareth, Uwayne and Launcelot likewise pilgrimage toward the Sankreale, but find no adventures or success, a significant comment on their limited worthiness. After killing seven knights at the Castle of Ladies, Gawayne is reproved for his easy disposition to kill—"for Galahad himself alone bete hem

all seven the day toforne, but hys lyvyng is such that he shall sle no man lyghtly" (651). The procession continues with the disguised Galahad's overcoming Launcelot and Percivale, who seek a female recluse's advice. In an old Chapel, Lancelot spies a silver candelabra with six glowing candles invisibly carried, and white palfreys bearing a sick knight on a litter calling: "Whan shall thys sorow leve me, and whan shall the holy vessell com by me wherethorow I shall be heled? For I have endured thus longe for litill trespasse, a full grete whye!" (653). The dozing Launcelot soon becomes aware of a silver table and the Holy Grail vessel following, as the sick old man sits up, praying for his malady to end. A miracle then ensues, for after the knight crawls on hands and knees to kiss the vessel, he is joyfully restored. Eventually the grail and shining candles float into the chapel, so the sinful Launcelot can no longer see them or rise, but shame him into repentance. The old knight's squire suggests that Launcelot's sins have kept him from awaking to a clear vision just as Percivale and Bor's sins have kept them from locating the Grail. But the Grail winner is aided by Percivale's wiser sister who ushers him onto the magic boat, a place of no land, only if he believe in Christ. Here lies a crown of silk on a bed with a gemmed sword nearby—symbols of power. Her detailed history of the Grail and sword afford him entrance to its miracles. Next, an earl on his deathbed tells Galahad, "Now behovith the to go to the Maymed Kynge as sone a thou mayste, for he shall resayve by the helth which he hath abydden so longe" (717). Lacking such instruction, the knight would never reach the Grail. Finally at Corbenic Castle emerge three angels bearing candles, a towel, and a bleeding spear initiating a Eucharistic ceremony wherein a host becomes the likeness of a child. The bishop concludes "But yet hast thou nat sene [the grail] so opynly as thou shalt se hit in the cité of Sarras . . . go hense and beare with the thys holy vessell, for this nyght hit shall depart frome the realme of Logrus" (735). Soon after at the king's death, a heavenly voice named the youngest, Galahad, the next ruler. All this was done by the elderly "Joseph of Aramathy, which oure Lord had sente to thee to bear the felyship" (738). The power of the aged is strongest in Malory's tale, as old men and women from every walk of life and social stratum guide the young to the Grail victory.

Conclusion

The role of the feminine in effecting success on the Grail quest throughout the legend is unique. None of the questers are maidens, for young, strong, energetic women, physically capable of the task are seen as sexual temptations who obstruct the unraveling of this holy mystery to save king and country. Older women, on the other hand, are often enlightened authority figures and keepers of the tradition, providing information and advice about themselves, relatives, and the tasks of the

seekers. But one exception, that of Perceval / Parzival / Percivale's sister, prove not all women are dangerous Eve-surrogates. After guiding the seekers to the magic ship, the unnamed woman is offered a mere moment in time, and a mere gift to give the more powerful males: she produces a new belt for the sword woven from her golden hair, of more symbolic than actual value, and willingly donates her lifeblood, and hence her life, to the leper-princess. Although her male companions provide her a dignified end at sea, it is nevertheless an end—to her life and her contribution to the redemptive Grail adventures. Her role is profound, but distinctly limited in time, space, and effect.

Maidens are, however, generally accorded the role of Grail-bearers, although denied the quest. The rationale may be if male adventurers have found the Grail castle eschewing female temptation, they are now safe from feminine influence, given the mesmerizing, distracting pageant in which they are embroiled. The maids are confident, competent, and secure in their critical, but limited role. Notably, their task has no direct impact on the outcome of King or country. While the gauntlet goes to young males, another consideration reveals the ambiguous role of the aged: in all cases, the afflicted victim is an elderly male whose wound results more from experience and adventure than from old age itself. His wound and hence that of the community is worthy of cure, and responsibility for this recuperation falls on the youth. Although authors have often considered the utility of the aged, any single evaluation of their merit disregards the ambiguity of that state. Representative European Grail romances in the French, German, Welsh, and English tradition have acknowledged the limits of the aged, but more importantly recognized their essential function in supporting youthful Grail-seekers. Inhering in both the figures of Perceval/Parzival/Peredur/Percivale-Galahad and in the image of old sage is the epitome of power and privation; the interdependence of youth and old age, in their opposing but complementary roles, means each group needs the other to succeed. Initially, the brash young protagonist fails to heed the advice of the sages; only when he gradually accepts this wisdom does he mature and succeed in his quest which the wise, but aged lacks strength to do. Throughout Grail romances, such as in Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, the elderly provide the key to ancestry, collective wisdom, and experience. Nevertheless, as these writers consistently emphasize in their Grail stories, Perceval/Parzival/Peredur/Percivale-Galahad and other youthful protagonists must learn from their elders before developing maturity and assuming the throne of a now-healed Grail kingdom.

The youthful quest is thus much more than a victory of prowess; while the young knights may be strong, they often lack experience. Similarly, while the elderly possess wisdom, they lack strength and capability at this time of their lives. Success demands a mutual, cooperative endeavor, joining theory and praxis. Through this collaboration, the experienced earn respect and honor, especially in

the Welsh *Peredur*, but also in Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and Malory's *Morte Darthur*. At every turn, mature characters are narrative catalysts providing knowledge and wisdom; they help the protagonist survive in critical moral and physical battles, and thus prepare the path to his ultimate triumph, and their salvation through it.

Chrétien's *Perceval* and the Welsh *Peredur* perhaps come the farthest, initially being the most unpolished and naive. Every encounter is a revelation. They boy heavily relies on others because his position is that of uninformed ingenue, lacking all social grace and sophistication. Hence the role of mentor in these romances is the most striking and influential because most needed.

Wolfram's *Parzival* sees the aged of extreme importance as well; however, while in some situations, their advice proves appropriate and constructive, in others, it is unintentionally destructive, perhaps because lacking in clarity. The youth might have more productively pursued his own path, disregarding some contradictory lessons of a single or various conflicting ancestors. But Wolfram balances his depiction of *Parzival*'s development, since old and young must cooperate to achieve the Grail and save the wasteland, and courtly society. Moreover, this remarkably sensitive poet appreciates the characteristic features of both generations, expressing his sympathetic understanding of both, truly a sign of profound humanism.

Thomas Malory continues this literary tradition in his "Tale of the Sankreal" by examining generational conflict, but often assigns wise sages a more nurturing role, helping the youth grow into their social function through experience. Malory did not fully differentiate between genders and, similar to his forerunners, attributed greatest authority to both older women and men. Here, they collectively contribute to Galahad's triumph and the other questers' searches. The author implies that only those beyond their sexual peak, and hence sexual influence, could succeed in achieving the Grail, for sexuality clouds judgment and decision-making. Thus only the elderly or chaste are granted spiritual enlightenment which heralds success.

Significantly, however, all medieval Grail romances see the elderly no longer physically powerful enough to overcome Grail hurdles, protect, or rescue their society from wasteland deterioration. Hence, their young proteges must first learn how to succeed from their elders and then physically execute the tasks necessary for salvation themselves. Only close cooperation of young and old, as Malory implies, can overcome past devastation and ensure a constructive, harmonious future. Thus, youthful strength and energy must be closely interlaced with experience and wisdom to cure the illness and prior wounds of a sick society. Only in wisely curing a wounded, helpless, old king can the young protagonist redeem him and his realm, and with his new kingship triumph over future challenges.

While explanations for the Fisher King's wound vary, and whether being

wounded is positive or negative is ambiguous, the wounded man is always powerful, always the king or leader, always an elderly relative of the youth who must heal him. Is the old king a scapegoat, accepting punishment for the entire community, and hence a hero? Or guilty for having brought this calamity on himself and the realm? In any event, he is impotent to change the situation himself, but must rely on a youth, who will inevitably replace him as king, but not as victim.

Although details of these various Grail Quest romances vary, certain common underlying assumptions and conclusions cogently unify them. One inescapable conclusion is the surprising reliance of strong, virile, dedicated, youthful knights, first upon elderly ancestors for knowledge, and then upon weak, emasculated, patient elderly kings, for their own redemption opportunity. Only in saving the ailing king can the youth be saved. Secondly is the concomitant dependence of the elderly victim upon that youthful savior, when he attains physical strength and mental maturity, to end the old man's suffering. The two provide a hand-and-glove co-dependent fit. In the fullness of time, the maturing youth steps into the shoes of the King, wears his crown, replaces him in the community, and produces his own children, vindicating the reparation of the thigh-wound impotence. The result, then, is a mutual co-redemption: age and youth each redeem the other by fulfilling their equally efficacious roles in the schema of the Grail intrigue.

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Old Age and Medieval Misogyny: The Old Woman¹

From a post-feminist, twenty-first-century perspective, the old woman who emerges from several of the major works of the western Middle Ages is a frightening figure. Harsh physical portraits of old men are relatively rare in medieval literature, but work after work features repulsive, toothless, stinking, ancient women who hobble about begging, bewailing their poverty, and, again and again, trapping young women into sex. This old woman is not only a literary figure. Jole Agrimi and Chiara Crisciani, both historians, cite medieval preachers, moralists, and pamphleteers who accuse old women of sorcery and magic: they control fertility, impotence, and abortions, and they can concoct ruinous philters that bring on love.² John V. Fleming describes the *vetula* as “a truly European phenomenon, appearing in all the major vernacular literatures of the West as well as in Latin poetry and exemplary fiction.” Sermons, exempla, and moralizing pieces, he notes, warn against her as a false counselor who lures young people to dance the old dance of love. The *vetula*, Fleming stresses, is “as much a convention of the pulpit as of closet comedy.”³ Beliefs yield texts and texts yield beliefs. When the ideas of literature and public discourse reinforce each other, they are self-perpetuating. The powerful and surprisingly widely read and reproduced medieval literature that portrays this dominant conception of the old woman both

¹ The arguments in this paper are developed at much greater length and from a different perspective in Gretchen Mieszkowski, *Medieval Go-Betweens and Chaucer's Pandarus*. The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 9–78.

Editor's note: this paper and the following by Karen Pratt were independently written, and at first sight seem to address much of the same material. However, despite a certain overlap, the interpretive approaches are considerably different, which allows us to grasp better the discursive nature of the topic of ‘old age in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance’ with respect to old women. Moreover, both authors reach different conclusions, and this also in light of a set of different literary-historical sources examined at the end of both papers.

² Jole Agrimi and Chiara Crisciani, “Savoir médical et anthropologie religieuse: Les Représentations et les fonctions de la *vetula* (XIIIe–XVe siècle),” *Annales ESC* 48 (1993): 1281–308; here 1299–1300.

³ John V. Fleming, *The Roman de la rose: A Study in Allegory and Iconography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 171–73.

fueled and was fueled by contemporary attitudes. The strength and importance of those conceptions cannot be evaded given their ultimate impact. Europe began executing witches in the early fourteenth century. Before the witch-hunt was over, by conservative estimate, 60,000 witches had been executed, most of them by burning.⁴ Witches were predominantly old women. It is important to remember a second point as well: these literary portraits of old women, full of loathing as they are, were written by and for men.

Giovanni Boccaccio spells out best the conception of women and women's lives that undergirds medieval literature's quite astonishing depiction of old women. In a *Decameron* tale, a homosexual's young, sexy, very disappointed bride turns for help to an old woman who is a professional procurer. The old woman urges the bride to fill her empty bed with lovers while she still can. Age has no consolations for a woman, the old woman says: "'E da che diavol siam noi poi, da che noi siam vecchie, se non da guardar la cenere intorno al focolare?'" ("And what the devil are we women good for when we are old anyway, only to sit around the fire and stare at the ashes?") No man wants to look at us: "'anzi ci cacciano in cucina a dir delle favole con la gatta e ad annoverare le pentole e le scodelle.'" ("On the contrary, we are chased into the kitchen to tell stories to the cat or to count the pots and pans.") Men can do a thousand things, the old woman continues, "'ma le femine a niuna altra cosa che a fare questo e figliuoli ci nascono, e per questo son tenute care.'" ("But women are not good for anything but doing that one thing and giving birth to children, and for this reason we are held so dear.")⁵ With women's lives reduced to having sex and giving birth to children, a post-menopausal woman is indeed without worth.

A topos of this literature matches old and young women, with chilling impact. Revulsion against thinking about an old woman's body sexually powers these episodes. In a love debate in the *Filocolo*⁶ (ca. 1336–1338), a young man sees a poor, shrunken, withered old woman begging at the house of the young woman he loves. He hires the old woman to carry messages and arrange a meeting for him, but once the old woman, the young woman, and the lover are together, the young woman's brothers appear. To punish the man for attempting to disgrace them, they tell him he must choose. He can die for trying to seduce their sister or he can

⁴ Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (London: Longman, 1987), 21. See also Lyndal Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

⁵ Giovanni Boccaccio, "Giornata quinta, novella decima," *Il decameron*, ed. Aldo Rossi (Bologna, 1977), 317–22; here 318; "Fifth Day, Tenth Story," *The Decameron*, transl. Mark Musa and Peter Bondanella (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 369–76; here 371.

⁶ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il filocolo*, transl. Donald Cheney, with collaboration of Thomas G. Bergin. Garland Library of Medieval Literature, Series B, 43 (New York: Garland, 1985), Bk. 4, sections 63–66, 290–94.

sleep one year with the old woman and one year with the young woman, but he must kiss, caress, and make love to the one exactly as much as he does to the other. The love debate question, then, is which woman should the young man spend his nights with for the first year: the beautiful young woman he loves, or the old woman? No matter how the debaters twist and turn their arguments, behind the much celebrated flesh of the young woman lurks the crone: joy and misery, bliss and disgust, death hovering over the best of life.

Disgust at aged female flesh powers another of these episodes, this time even more directly. In this work, the old woman's body is not simply thought about sexually, it is experienced sexually, and the essential element of the description of her body is its capacity to rout desire.⁷ Ovid wants to possess a young girl—she is said to be fourteen or sixteen at different points in the text—and he describes the girl's body with a lengthy conventional list of its beauties. He tries to hire an extremely poor old woman who works for the girl's family to go between for him, but she refuses. When he insists, she finally pretends to arrange a meeting. She tells him she believes the girl loves him but is too shy to admit it, and she then proposes that he take her by surprise. Normally the girl sleeps in her mother's bedroom, the old woman explains, but the next time she is asked to wash the girl's hair, she will arrange to have her spend the night in a little room just off the entryway to the house. After nine, the old woman will unlock the main door for Ovid and put out all the lamps, and he is to undress in silence and enter the bed where the old woman assures him he will find the young girl naked. He should possess her at once, she counsels, because as soon as he has taken her virginity, she will love him. The virgin that Ovid finds in the bed, however, is the old woman, not the young woman. Before Ovid figures this out, he embraces and possesses her, and her unplucked, withered rose, as he puts it, extinguishes the firebrand of his lust: "Et tele rose fut viellie / Qui encor n'avoit esté cueillie."⁸ (And that rose, which had never been gathered before, was already old.) Ovid details in disgust his experience of the rest of the old woman's flesh: her dirty skin, wrinkled up like a wet purse; her breastless, nippleless, sluggish, hard chest and earth-hard stomach, furrowed as if from a ploughshare; and her dried-up loins, her thighs hollowed out by want, and her swollen knees as hard as stones for making walls.⁹ None of the metamorphoses in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* could equal this one:

Ces mutacions que j'ay dictes,
Qui sont en mon grand livre escriptes,

⁷ Jean Lefèvre, *La Vieille ou les dernières amours d'Ovide*, ed. Hippolyte Cocheris (Paris: Auguste Hérissé, 1861).

⁸ Lefèvre, *La Vieille ou les dernières amours*, lines 3173–74.

⁹ Lefèvre, *La Vieille ou les dernières amours*, lines 3184–98.

N'a point mutacion pareille
 Dont ce, me vint à grant merveille,
 Qu'en si pou de temps devenue
 Fut vielle, hideuse et chanue.¹⁰

[Nowhere in the mutations that I have related and written about in my big book is there a mutation equal to this one. A great miracle occurred that in such a short time she should become so old, hideous, and bald.]

This narrative was quite popular, and it was reworked in a number of languages. It originally appeared in approximately 1250 as part of an encyclopedic poem, *The Pseudo-Ovidian De Vetula*, written by a Frenchman and first circulated in France, but read and copied in England and Italy.¹¹ By the middle of the fourteenth century, a second Frenchman, Jean Lefèvre, rewrote the Latin poem in French verse, the version discussed here, and doubled the length of the story involving the go-between.¹² The old woman and her bed trick yield the poem's one substantial narrative section, and it occupies most of its second book and must have accounted for much of its popularity. The old woman in Jean Lefèvre's narrative in fact is an astonishing exception; she protects her young charge, and she is the single instance of a safeguarding old woman in this literature.

All the old women in these medieval stories are physically disgusting, but the majority of them are wicked and dangerous as well.¹³ The literary derivation of the medieval tradition of the wicked old woman is unclear. Most commentators accept that she descends from Dipsas, the ancient hag who teaches the courtesan how to get more money and gifts from her current or potential lovers in Ovid's *Amores* 1.8.¹⁴ Fleming, for instance, calls Dipsas "the Great Mother of all medieval literary bawds,"¹⁵ and Dipsas certainly supplies many of the techniques that reappear in La Vieille's advice to Fair Welcoming in the *Roman de la rose*. However, most of these stories about wicked old women have nothing to do with teaching a young woman how to fleece lovers. For the most part, they concern an old woman's trapping a young woman into having sex with a man who has hired the old woman as his agent. There is no trace of Dipsas's functions in these activities. Moreover, Dipsas is a chronic drunk; none of these medieval old women are said

¹⁰ Lefèvre, *La Vieille ou les dernières amours*, lines 3175–80.

¹¹ *The Pseudo-Ovidian De Vetula*, ed. Dorothy M. Robathan (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1968), 8, 30.

¹² Cocheris, ed., xxxiv, in: Lefèvre, *La Vieille ou les dernières amours*.

¹³ Morawski's overview of this literary figure and her roots remains the best: Jean Brasdefer, *Pamphile et Galatée*, ed. Joseph de Morawski (Paris: Champion, 1917), 105–55. William Matthews, "The Wife of Bath and All Her Sect," *Viator* 5 (1974): 413–43, adds instances to Morawski's collection.

¹⁴ Matthews, "The Wife of Bath," 420–21, was the first to argue this position.

¹⁵ John V. Fleming, *Classical Imitation and Interpretation in Chaucer's Troilus* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 161.

to be drunks. In addition, unlike Dipsas, the medieval figures are generally very poor. They either are or pretend to be beggars, and they use begging to gain access to women. They also usually camouflage their operations by association with the church. They say rosaries repeatedly and ostentatiously, or perform some church function, or wear a nun's habit, or talk about spending all their time in convents. Sir Love instructs the Archpriest in successful seduction in the *Libro de buen amor*, the fourteenth-century Spanish poem which contains the most spectacular collection of go-betweens and discussions of going between of any of these medieval works. To find a go-between, Sir Love tells the Archpriest to look for "unas viejas / que andan las iglesias e saben las callejas: / grandes cuentas al cuel[lo]" ("one of those old crones that frequent the churches and know all the back alleys—the ones with the huge rosaries dangling from their necks").¹⁶ Finally, these old women are often very clever. When there are tricks in these stories, they ordinarily contrive them, and a large number of these are very tricky stories. These are the essential attributes of the medieval old woman, and none of them have anything to do with Ovid's portrait of Dispas.¹⁷

The western medieval literary tradition of the old woman begins most definitively in a strange hybrid narrative told so predominantly through monologue and dialogue that there is only one line of narration in the whole poem. It is called *Pamphilus*, it belongs to a group of medieval works generally referred to as Latin Comedies, and it dates from the beginning of the twelfth century.¹⁸ Although the Latin Comedies were written in the twelfth century and the fabliaux date from the thirteenth, their subject matter is so much like fabliau subject matter that their relationship to the fabliaux has been debated ever since study of the two genres began. The style of the Latin Comedies, however, is altogether unlike fabliau style. Not only are they written in Latin instead of the vernacular, they are full of mythological references, elaborate word play, and rhetorical devices, and they are told in self-consciously clever Latin, in elegiac distichs for the most part. Furthermore, most of them are written so predominantly in monologue and dialogue that, despite their very early date and

¹⁶ Juan Ruiz, *Libro de buen amor*, ed. Giorgio Chiarini (Milan: Ricciardi, 1964); Rigo Mignani and Mario A. Di Cesare, transl., *The Book of Good Love* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1970), stanza 438.

¹⁷ Philippe Ménard cautions against seeing Ovid's Dipsas as the source of the old woman. As Ménard says, "Dipsas est seulement une sorcière, et non une entremetteuse." *Le Rire et le sourire dans le roman courtois en France au moyen âge (1150–1250)*. Publications romanes et françaises, 105 (Geneva: Droz, 1969), 211, note 120.

¹⁸ Peter Dronke, "A Note on *Pamphilus*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 42 (1979): 225–30; here 225–26. Stefano Pittaluga accepts Peter Dronke's date and reviews his arguments for it. Pittaluga, ed., *Pamphilus*, in: *Commedie latine del XII e XIII secolo*, 8 vols. (Genoa: Istituto di filologia classica e medievale, 1976–2000), 3, 11–137; here 13–15.

the late development of medieval theater, many scholars believe they must have been performed as plays of some sort. *Pamphilus* is one of the earliest of this strange group of writings.

The old woman in *Pamphilus* is the first of the old women figures developed at length in western medieval literature. Clever, effective, frightening, and an old hand at trapping women for men, she fans the fires of desire cunningly in both the man and the woman, and she lies so repeatedly that it is difficult to know what is actually going on in the plot. She is never named, only referred to as Anus, Old Woman, and she is herself decidedly unappealing: a cold, unmoved, manipulative observer who stands outside the young people's relationship and responds only to what is in it for her, untouched by the suffering she causes. The Old Woman presides over an heiress rape. Pamphilus wants to marry Galatea, but he is neither rich enough nor of high enough birth to be an acceptable suitor for her. The only way he can hope to win her as his wife is if he succeeds in seducing her, and so he hires the Old Woman. The Old Woman is the central character of the poem, "*anus subtilis et ingeniosa / Artibus et Veneris apta ministra satis*"¹⁹ (a subtle and clever old woman, a very suitable helper in the arts of Venus). Before the rape, Pamphilus and Galatea have only a single brief conversation together. Every other scene is between one of them and the Old Woman. Throughout the poem, the Old Woman maneuvers to be paid more. She laments her poverty, her weakness, and her great age, tells Pamphilus about another suitor whom she will not consider because he is only offering her a fur piece and some old dresses, explains to Pamphilus that she expects to be supported as part of his future household, reminds him how much he is going to owe her, and worries that once he has what he wants, he will leave her with empty promises. Even her last line, which is the last line of the poem, is a plea for her reward: "*Per me felices, este mei memores!*"²⁰ ("Made happy by my efforts, remember me!")

It is the Old Woman, not Pamphilus, who courts Galatea. With Pamphilus, the Old Woman plies the trade of love openly; with Galatea, she acts shocked at the suggestion that she might possibly be being rewarded to speak on Pamphilus's behalf. She persuades and pressures Galatea skillfully, pretends to have thought of the match entirely by herself, lies about both Pamphilus's wealth and his lineage, and praises Pamphilus, Venus, and the delights of love until Galatea falls in love and is torn between desire and fear, love and modesty, and cannot understand why Pamphilus does not simply ask her parents to let him marry her.

The story ends with a passionless rape. From the start of the poem, Pamphilus's desperation arises from his desire to marry Galatea, which is thwarted by their unequal birth and wealth. He never sounds as if he is desperate to possess her. The

¹⁹ Pittaluga, ed., *Pamphilus*, lines 281–82.

²⁰ Pittaluga, ed., *Pamphilus*, line 780.

Old Woman first mentions rape to Pamphilus after explaining that she intends to ask Galatea to meet privately with him at her house. She then spells out his role grimly. It is his responsibility to make the most of such a meeting, she tells him: "Te precor esse virum. / Mens animusque manet inconstans semper amantis : / Parvaque forte tibi quod petis hora dabit"²¹ ("I entreat you to be a man. The mind and spirit of a girl in love are always wavering, and a small moment will perhaps give you what you desire"). Alison Elliott observes that *labor*, meaning "hard work," "drudgery," appears twenty-seven times in this 780-line poem, "an essentially unromantic, rather cynical view of love."²²

The Old Woman traps Galatea. She is never given a chance to decide whether to risk meeting alone with Pamphilus. Instead, the Old Woman coaxes her into eating fruit and nuts at her house, Pamphilus pretends to burst the door bolts, and the Old Woman exits on the pretext that a neighbor is calling her. As she shuts her door behind her, she notes for the benefit of the neighborhood that now no one is at her home; the house is empty. Pamphilus's attempts at lovemaking quickly devolve into force and Galatea's dialogue charts the progress of the rape—her subdued hands, her bruised breasts, her inadequate strength. She cries out against Pamphilus for hurting and betraying her, threatens to scream, and finally, sadly and anticlimactically, she vows never again to let the Old Woman deceive her. At last, she denounces Pamphilus: "Huius victor eris facti, licet ipsa reluctet, / Sed tamen inter nos rumpitur omnis amor!"²³ ("You'll win this time, no matter how much I resist, but it will destroy our love forever!"). When the Old Woman returns, Galatea is still weeping inconsolably. The Old Woman pretends to complete ignorance about what has happened but she cannot fool Galatea this time, and she denounces the Old Woman's treachery. The Old Woman is cold, practical, and prudent. Since it is too late to change what has happened, Galatea and Pamphilus must marry, and since she has matched them up so well, they must support her financially.

Galatea is the most obvious casualty of the Old Woman's going between. From a beautiful, innocent, cheerful young person full of eagerness to love, she has become a violated woman. Pamphilus is the agent of her violation, but the Old Woman is its instigator and true cause. And while Galatea is the Old Woman's primary victim, she corrupts Pamphilus as well when he allows her to redefine love as rape for him. In this grim little story of betrayal, the means to the marriage may well have destroyed the love, as Galatea claims, and the go-between's

²¹ Pittaluga, ed., *Pamphilus*, lines 546–48.

²² Alison Goddard Elliott, "Introduction," *Seven Medieval Latin Comedies*, transl. Elliott. Garland Library of Medieval Literature, 20 (New York: Garland, 1984), xxix.

²³ Pittaluga, ed., *Pamphilus*, lines 695–96.

callousness and insensitivity to the people involved in the relationship she was hired to create may actually have made the relationship impossible.

Despite Galatea's pleas, protests, tears, and denunciation of Pamphilus, a number of scholars do not believe that this episode recounts a serious rape. The assumption behind these readings is that Pamphilus was simply following Ovid's advice in the *Ars amatoria* that women like to be forced, that they mean 'yes' when they say 'no,' and so some force is permissible. The complications here are legion because *Pamphilus*, as well as many of the rest of the Latin Comedies, was used as a cathedral schoolroom text. In fact, *Pamphilus* remained in use in the schools until the Renaissance.²⁴ Boys learned Latin from these Comedies, and they also learned Latin from the *Ars amatoria*. Moreover, most of the Comedies, *Pamphilus* included, refer repeatedly to Ovid, and Venus, in a speech in the beginning of *Pamphilus*, says Galatea would prefer to lose her virginity by force.²⁵ Leyla Rouhi, in *Mediation and Love*, claims that there are no victims in these Latin comedies and that the apparent victims in fact "end up enjoying the sexual trap set for them or at least put up little resistance at the crucial stages."²⁶ Alastair Minnis, stressing that *Pamphilus* is a text for the all-male elementary schoolroom of clerics, claims that it is perfectly clear that "Galatea (as is typical of a woman, the text implies) did not mean what she said when she asserted that 'all love between' them 'is now broken off'."²⁷ Jill Mann argues that this is not "outright rape" because Galatea says she "will scream" instead of simply screaming. Pamphilus is forcing Galatea to help her save face by "taking on himself the responsibility and guilt of copulation."²⁸

But what would a historically appropriate reading of this text be? What level of Ovidian "force" would the readers of *Pamphilus* have considered a suitable part of a romantic encounter? Perhaps *Facetus*, a mid-twelfth-century Latin art of love clearly inspired by Ovid, can shed some light on these issues. *Facetus*'s account of appropriate seduction techniques tells the lover to touch the woman's clothes, then her hip and side, then kiss her, then, after long, passionate embraces, caress her breasts, her thighs, and her stomach. Both the man and the woman should be naked by this point, and if she resists consummation, the man should force her, because only prostitutes seek out intercourse.²⁹ This is a description of seduction and mutual lovemaking. It bears no resemblance to what happens to Galatea.

²⁴ Morawski, ed., *Pamphile*, 16–17.

²⁵ Pittaluga, ed., *Pamphilus*, lines 113–14.

²⁶ Leyla Rouhi, *Mediation and Love: A Study of the Medieval Go-Between in Key Romance and Near-Eastern Texts*. Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, 93 (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 90.

²⁷ Alastair Minnis, *Magister amoris: The Roman de la Rose and Vernacular Hermeneutics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 184.

²⁸ Jill Mann, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1991), 97.

²⁹ Alison Goddard Elliott, ed. and transl., "The *Facetus*: or, The Art of Courtly Living," *Allegorica* 2 (1977): 27–57; here 44–45.

Marjorie Curry Woods, wrestling with the erotic violence in poems like *Pamphilus*, argues that through such texts, studied in school only by boys and men, "young boys learned about sexual violence as a method of defining their manhood and controlling their own lives."³⁰ Those young boys must also have acquired some dangerous ideas about how to relate to young women and what to expect from old women. An early fourteenth-century lord chancellor of Oxford clearly recognized *Pamphilus*'s potentials. He decreed that, to increase students' morals, grammar teachers should avoid reading and interpreting *Pamphilus* and "'any other book which might lure or provoke his scholars to what is forbidden'."³¹

Pamphilus began as a Latin schoolroom text but this strange work, with its mixture of clever Latin, elaborate word play, and sexual violence, had a tremendous impact on western medieval literature. It quickly became one of the very widely read works of the Middle Ages. It has survived in 170 manuscripts from throughout the continent,³² was translated many times, writers of florilegia cited it frequently, and it was quoted or alluded to by a large number of authors including Chaucer, Gower, and Skelton.³³ It even contributed a word to the English language; "pamphlet" derives from it. Most important of all, to one degree or another, it ultimately begot four famous progeny. According to Ernest Langlois, the characterization of the Anus led directly to the *Roman de la rose*'s La Vieille, and both Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun used *Pamphilus* as their source for several of the allegorical figures in the *Roman*, as well as for its subject and method.³⁴ Three other very important works are also based significantly on *Pamphilus*: Juan Ruiz's *Libro de buen amor*, Geoffrey Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*,³⁵ and *La Celestina*.³⁶

Another old woman is a background figure in a second Latin Comedy, *Alda*, written in approximately 1170.³⁷ The old woman, Alda's nurse and chaperon, dresses a young man in his twin sister's clothes so that he can seduce Alda, whose

³⁰ Marjorie Curry Woods, "Rape and the pedagogical rhetoric of sexual violence," *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages*, ed. Rita Copeland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 56–86; here 73.

³¹ Quoted in Minnis, *Magister amoris*, 196.

³² Elliott, "Intro.," *Seven*, xxxiii.

³³ Pittaluga, ed., *Pamphilus*, 41–44; Morawski, ed., *Pamphile*, 13–20.

³⁴ Ernest Langlois, *Origines et sources du Roman de la rose* (Paris: Thorin, 1891), 27; Morawski, ed., *Pamphile*, discusses Langlois's argument, 31–34; Alastair Minnis, however, finds the influence unprovable, *Magister amoris*, 179.

³⁵ Thomas J. Garbáty, "The *Pamphilus* Tradition in Ruiz and Chaucer," *Philological Quarterly* 46 (1967): 457–70.

³⁶ Morawski, ed., *Pamphile*, 54–55.

³⁷ Marcel Wintzweiller, ed., Guillaume de Blois, *Alda*, in *La "Comédie" latine en France au XIIe siècle*, ed. Gustave Cohen. Société d'édition "les belles-lettres," 2 (Paris: Société d'édition "les belles-lettres, 1931), 1: 107–51; dating 111–13.

father has locked her away from all contact with men because of her great beauty. The outrageous trick succeeds, and the girl becomes pregnant without ever glimpsing the meaning of what has occurred. Although the old woman is neither described nor given significant dialogue, she stands ominously behind the action, a figure of betrayal and treachery, responsible for guarding and protecting the young woman, not dressing up young men in women's clothes to take her virginity.

A third old woman in a Latin Comedy dominates her story so totally that she is its central interest. Baucis, in *Baucis et Traso* (1150–1175),³⁸ is the demonized old woman incarnate. She is a witch and a procurer, and she operates in a different social scene from the tame, upper-class milieu of *Pamphilus*. She hawks women for a living in a town underworld of pimps, bawds, thugs, and bullies where one man urinates on another and men and women punch, maul, and tear out each other's hair. No memorable realistic details brought *Pamphilus* to life, but there are many in *Baucis et Traso*. As a man and his servant walk through the town at night, for instance, the servant carries bread to throw to silence dogs that bark at them along the way,³⁹ and when Traso, a soldier who is being fleeced by Baucis, realizes that she has disappeared after he has paid her and given her presents all morning, he beats his slaves to make himself feel better.

Baucis is even more spectacularly ancient than the rest of these old women: "'Annos quingentos vixisti, nec nisi nugis; / Os tibi dente caret, falsa remiscet adhuc. / Tu senii fex es'"⁴⁰ ("You have lived five hundred years, totally frivolously; your mouth has no teeth in it and still mixes together lies. You are the dregs of old age"). Like many of these old women, Baucis is a former prostitute, but she is most importantly a pimp, and much of this poem celebrates her techniques. Baucis is currently selling a prostitute she claims is a virgin, and she sells her over and over to man after man, promising her virginity to all the men who give her gifts and changing her name for different men who then compete with each other by comparing the attractions of the women they expect to possess. Once Baucis identifies Traso as her best prospect, she concentrates her sales efforts on him, hawking her wares: "'Virgo, sed virga, sed flos, sed fructus amoris, / Lumen virgineum, forma decore nitens'"⁴¹ ("She's a virgin, a tender sprout, a blossom, a peach ripe for love, a fresh flame; her beauty just glows"). Traso is ready to rush to Baucis's home, but Baucis has no intention of selling the woman to Traso outright. Instead, like the old professional she is, she increases his appetite and frustration level by first holding him off with accounts of the woman's delicacy.

³⁸ Giovanni Orlandi, ed., *Baucis et Traso*, in *Commedie latine*, 3, 243–303; dating 248–49.

³⁹ Orlandi, ed., *Baucis*, lines 205–06.

⁴⁰ Orlandi, ed., *Baucis*, lines 141–43.

⁴¹ Orlandi, ed., *Baucis*, lines 37–38.

Glyceria is sleeping, Baucis explains, and must not be awakened or she will become ill. She will only eat if her meal is brought to her as soon as she becomes hungry; keep her waiting for a drink, and she will send it away. Baucis knows her man. Traso's desire rises with all these details of the woman's delicacy. Baucis's delays and descriptions drive him wild, and each little advance to Glyceria prompts him to give Baucis something extra. Traso is half out of his mind with desire when he gives Baucis his first large gift, a gold ring. But instead of taking Traso to Glyceria, Baucis leads him through the market, getting him to buy what she wants as presents for the woman, or simply having him pay outright.

Baucis is a witch as well as an accomplished pimp. Another go-between charges her with being able to control fertility: she ruins other people's crops or makes her own crops grow with herbal charms, or she curses men with the inability to father children, or makes women conceive.⁴² These are standard accusations brought against witches in the Middle Ages, and Baucis never denies them. The subject of most of Baucis's magic, however, is Glyceria, the re-named prostitute. Initially Baucis's changes in the prostitute are cosmetic or mechanical. She makes her arms more supple by beating them with a spatula, narrows her waist with a belt, and teaches her to speak and act elegantly and modestly. But witchcraft takes over when Baucis lengthens Glyceria's face, widens her forehead, narrows her shoulders, thins her mouth, elongates her fingers, contracts her hands, and makes her hair more luxuriant and her neck more enticing.⁴³ Finally, with Traso due to pay a great price to possess Glyceria the next night, Baucis sets out to repair the prostitute's virginity. She assembles what she needs, we are told: herbs, unguents, potions, and drugs, but also a crow's whiteness, smoke, three puffs of wind, a blind man's eyes, hair from the forehead of a bald man, a eunuch's sexual member, a deaf man's hearing, and on and on with impossible items. Is this black magic, fraud, or a joke about the impossibility of regaining lost virginity? Whatever Baucis is up to, when Traso possesses Glyceria, he does not complain that he has been cheated.

The men in Baucis's story loathe her and revile her with unusual energy. One of them accuses her of keeping herself well supplied with poisons, but it is her ability to manipulate men's passions that makes her truly frightening and dangerous. She taps their deep fear of woman's sexual power, and their resentment of it. From time to time the more generic disgust with woman that lies behind their outbursts breaks through to the surface. Here is Traso when he realizes that he has paid for all Baucis's purchases all morning, only to have her disappear just when he expects her to take him to meet Glyceria: "*Femina, flamma nocens, dolor intimus, hostis amico. / Femina, summa mali, femina digna mori, / Femina fetoris dat*

⁴² Orlandi, ed., *Baucis*, lines 153–56.

⁴³ Orlandi, ed., *Baucis*, lines 3–7.

semina, femina mortem”⁴⁴ (“Woman, destructive flame, pain in the gut, enemy to the man who loves you. A woman is the greatest evil of all; a woman is better off dead; woman gives the seeds of decay; woman kills”).

From the Latin Comedies, *Pamphilus* in particular, the old woman emerged as a type figure, and as early as the twelfth century, she shows up in another genre. Even before she plays a role in fabliaux, she is found in *Éracle* (1165–1180),⁴⁵ an Old French romance by Gautier d’Arras.⁴⁶ The old woman in *Éracle* is the earliest surviving literary appearance of this figure in the vernacular. Like her Latin predecessors, she is poor, greedy, and old, a professional arranger of love affairs, and she brags about her skills in enticing and trapping women. She is described as “molt voiseuse et sage”⁴⁷ (very sly and wise), and everyone in the story recognizes her role and rewards her for it with gifts and support. No woman can resist her techniques, she claims, selling her services to a desperate young man; she can trap anyone at all for him, and she promises to win whatever woman he desires “de barat et de gile,” by lies and trickery, the traditional methods of the old women.⁴⁸

While technically the twelfth-century old woman from *Éracle* is like the Anus in *Pamphilus*—they are both poor, old, greedy, confident of their excellence and skilled at their work, and both are hired to capture women for men—the language the *Éracle* old woman uses links her instead to figures who will not appear until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. She uses a very large number of proverbs. (For one example, see lines 4055–58.) The Anus from *Pamphilus* also uses proverbs, though less conspicuously, but her proverbs are formal, even academic, compared to the far more colloquial proverbs of the old woman in *Éracle*. The old woman’s proverbialness becomes very important in the language of Trotaconventos and Urraca, two characters from the *Libro de buen amor*, as well as in the language of another old woman, Houdée, in *Pamphile et Galatée*, a fourteenth-century adaptation of *Pamphilus*. Is speaking in proverbs somehow traditional for the old woman figure? Was this tradition developed, perhaps, in other lost literary works, written between *Pamphilus* and *Éracle*? Or, more probably, was there a more ancient unwritten folk tradition in which women who speak in proverbs go between?

⁴⁴ Orlandi, ed., *Baucis*, lines 89–91.

⁴⁵ Gautier d’Arras, *Éracle*, ed. Guy Raynaud de Lage. Les Classiques français du moyen âge (Paris: Champion, 1976). For the dating, see Corinne Pierreville, *Gautier d’Arras: L’autre Chrétien*. Nouvelle bibliothèque du Moyen Âge, 55 (Paris: Champion, 2001), 13–15.

⁴⁶ See the extensive discussion of the same text by Karen Pratt in this volume.

⁴⁷ Gautier, *Éracle*, line 4023.

⁴⁸ Gautier, *Éracle*, line 4178.

By the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, the old woman arrives on the French fabliau scene playing her best known role: Auberee.⁴⁹ The tricks Auberee engineers are far more complex than anything any previous old woman concocted and she handles them masterfully. She is by far the most frightening of these go-betweens and the most powerful. She holds her cards close to her chest, pulling the strings on her marionettes but never sharing her plans with any of them. No matter how funny her fabliau becomes, she remains a sinister character, never part of the comedy she generates.

Working for a young man who steals forty pounds from his father to pay her before she will do anything at all, Auberee maneuvers her way into the home of the young wife he wants to possess by first begging for a little bread and white wine, reminding her that her widowed husband's first wife never turned her away when she was in need. Then, playing on the insecurities of the very young bride of a previously married man, she asks to see the wife's marriage bed: "Lors savroie certainement / Se tu gis ausi richement / Com fesoit la premiere fame"⁵⁰ ("Then I would know indeed whether you lie as richly as the first wife did"). Pressured by the sexual issues, the young bride trustingly ushers the old woman into her bedroom where Dame Auberee slips the young man's surcoat, with her needle and thimble rolled up tightly in it, under the quilt that covers the white straw of the bed. When the husband comes home to find a man's coat in his bed, he throws his wife out of the house without a word of explanation. Auberee, of course, is waiting to rescue her. She must not run to her father's house, Auberee warns. Her father will believe the worst of her, just like her husband, and her husband is probably drunk. She must spend the night at Auberee's.

The situation Auberee has created virtually guarantees success for the young man. The wife is in bed at the home of a known go-between, both the young man and the wife are undressed when he awakens her, and when she threatens to rouse the whole street with her screams, he tells her she will only shame herself if people of all ranks and importance see her completely naked beside him in the middle of the night. "N'i avra un seul qui ne cuit / Que j'aie fet a grant plenté / De vostre cors ma volenté"⁵¹ ("Not a single person will believe that I have not had my way with you over and over again"). When the young woman thinks about how publicly she will be shamed, she lets him quiet her, and they have sex.

But Auberee is not finished. She must reconcile husband and wife. In the middle of the next night, she takes the young woman to church and surrounds her with

⁴⁹ Willem Noomen and Nico van den Boogaard, eds., *Auberee, Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux*, 8 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1983–1993), 1, 160–312. Citations to *texte critique*. Dating and authorship (perhaps Jean Renart), 166–67.

⁵⁰ Noomen, *Auberee*, lines 190–92.

⁵¹ Noomen, *Auberee*, lines 386–88.

crosses and lighted candles as she lies in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary. Auberee then hits and kicks on the husband's door, denouncing his wicked treatment of his beautiful wife, sent to matins when she should be home behind the bed curtains. When the amazed husband finds his wife praying in the church, just as Auberee described, he takes her back home to bed and tells her he had been drunk the night before. One more trick is needed to finish off Dame Auberee's scheme. She groans and shrieks in the village street that the provost is about to confiscate all her earthly possessions because she owes thirty sous for losing a surcoat a young man hired her to mend. When the husband finds her thimble and needle in the surcoat, he is convinced his life is back in order again.

The Anus in *Pamphilus* traps Galatea, but there is nothing clever about her method of trapping her. Auberee's tricks, on the other hand, are exceedingly clever and they serve fabliau values of undermining conventional power structures and morality in the service of lust. Although the sexually successful conclusion of the fabliau—the couple has a day and two nights of sex and Auberee promises to reunite them—supports the comedy of the piece, *Auberee* remains another rape story. There is no indication that the young woman desires this young man. When he is kissing and caressing her in Dame Auberee's bedroom, she thinks only of her fear of shame, not of her love for him. She is a passive, powerless victim, trapped for violation and taken by surprise—literally awakened in the night by a naked man in her bed. As in *Pamphilus*, one of the story's sources of satisfaction is vicarious participation in male violence against a woman. But also as in *Pamphilus*, this is a taboo pleasure. The more protection against this taboo pleasure the story provides—while still leaving it functioning—the more comic the work can be. In *Pamphilus* the Anus performs this role, but she is less powerful, less cunning, and less in control than Auberee is. In *Auberee* the old woman carries responsibility for the sexual violence to such a degree that the fact that the pleasures of vicarious participation are taboo pleasures slips nearly out of sight.

The second brilliant fabliau that features the old woman was written in English in the thirteenth century. It is *Dame Sirith*,⁵² and the role the old woman plays is very similar to Auberee's. Like Auberee, she serves as a diversionary tactic, leaving the violation—with all its taboo pleasures—in full view while pulling attention away from the man who is actually violating the woman. Dame Sirith plays the weeping dog trick. Wilekin, a clerk, hires her to go between for him with Margery, a loving wife who has refused his advances. Dame Sirith feeds her little dog pepper and mustard and leads her to Margery's house where Dame Sirith weeps and wails over her tragic loss of her beautiful blond daughter, who was happily married to a very generous husband whom she loved far too well. One

⁵² *Dame Sirith*, in: *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett and G. V. Smithers. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 77–95.

day when her daughter's husband was out of town on an errand, Dame Sirith explains, a clerk declared his love for her, and when her daughter persisted in refusing him, by witchcraft, the clerk turned her into a dog. At this point Dame Sirith exhibits her dog: Look how she weeps! The tears meet on her cheeks! No wonder her own heart is bursting, Dame Sirith grieves, and she advises any young housewife to accept a clerk if he asks her for love. Margery is so frightened that she immediately begins begging Dame Sirith to bring Wilekin to her. Dame Sirith's going between has succeeded so splendidly that both the man and the woman are now hiring her, frantic for her help to bring them together.

The sexual violence exercised against innocent, appealing, generous, charitable Margery is clearly the major source of amusement in this story. This is not literal violence, of course. Once Dame Sirith has played her trick, Margery is desperate to have sex with Wilekin. Nevertheless, Margery's chastity, her sense of herself as an honorable, loving woman, and her self-definition are all violated. As the story opens, Margery is outspokenly in love with her husband. When Wilekin first approaches her, she laughs in his face. "My husband, my spouse, brought me with great honor to his house as a maiden. He loves me and I love him; our love is as true as steel," she tells him. "Ich am wif boþe god and trewe. / Trewe woman ne mai no mon cnowe / Þen Ich am""⁵³ ("I am a true, good wife. No man can find a truer woman than I am"). Margery begins this story as a proud, self-confident young person, secure in her valuing of herself. By its close, the old woman's cruel trick has silenced this voice. To preserve the sex act ending as comic, Dame Sirith, the frightening and hateful old woman, diverts the listener's attention from the serious human costs of the trick and redirects it to herself. It is as if the old woman, not the man, were violating the young woman. Dame Sirith's final advice to Wilekin is:

"And loke þat þou hire tille
And strek out hire þes.
God 3eue þe muchel kare
3eif þat þou hire spare,
Be wile þou mid hire bes."⁵⁴

["And see to it that you plow her and stretch out her thighs. If you spare her while you're with her, may God curse you with suffering!"]

In both *Auberee* and *Dame Sirith* the old woman emerges as the focus of the story's misogyny.

The most complexly developed and literarily influential of all the old women in medieval literature appears in another thirteenth-century text, the *Roman de la rose*

⁵³ Bennett, ed., *Dame Sirith*, lines 91–95, 121–23.

⁵⁴ Bennett, ed., *Dame Sirith*, lines 440–44.

(1275),⁵⁵ the enormous and enormously popular allegory that survives in more manuscripts than any other French vernacular text.⁵⁶ She is La Vieille, one of the allegorical figures in Jean de Meun's portion of the *Roman*. Unlike the old women in most of these stories, she is not developed through tricky plotting or her manipulations of other characters. Instead, she lectures, extolling her past life of sexual power and, wrinkled and powerless, lamenting her old age. Like many of these old women, she was a prostitute, and she describes prostituting herself and preaches the commodification of sexual relationships, the satisfying business of arousing, gratifying, and profiting from lust. She is both the seller and the thing sold, the merchant and the merchant's wares, and the relationships she describes are altogether exploitative. The villain in her lecture is desire. So long as young women protect themselves against love, they can maintain their sexual power over men and live off them. Once they fall in love, however, they become victims instead of subjugators. Relationships are a seesaw of exploitation: the woman exploits the man's desire for her, but as soon as she starts to feel passion, the man exploits her desire for him. This is the game of love as the Old Woman describes it, and the formula for winning at it is never to love.

The Old Woman's sex partners are customers, not lovers. She describes crowds of men competing for her with her door swinging open all day and men fighting over her at night. Sometimes she would have to hide one man while she entertained another, and, like active bidders at a hot auction, the competitors intensified each other's interest in the merchandise. At issue is the woman's body as an item for sale. Earlier old women were selling sexual access to young women; this one is describing selling sexual access to herself.

The young woman is represented as the Rose in this allegory and La Vieille is lecturing to Bel Accueil (Fair Welcoming), the personification of the young woman's capacity to respond to a lover. Accueil is a masculine noun, however, and so La Vieille is lecturing to a male, which introduces rich gender confusions into the narrative. The majority of recent commentators believe the text here exploits homoerotic meanings almost as much as heterosexual meanings. Simon Gaunt describes the plot as motivated "not by a man's attraction for a woman, but rather by the mutual attraction of two masculine figures." The *Roman's* literal narrative, Gaunt writes, "inclines towards the homoerotic while the allegorical (or 'improper?') narrative inclines towards the heterosexual."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la rose*, ed. Félix Lecoy. Les Classiques français du moyen âge, 92, 95, 98, 3 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1965–1970).

⁵⁶ Sarah Kay, "Sexual Knowledge: The Once and Future Texts of the *Romance of the Rose*," *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices*, ed. Judith Still and Michael Worton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 69–86; here 70.

⁵⁷ Simon Gaunt, "Bel Accueil and the Improper Allegory of the *Romance of the Rose*," *New Medieval Literatures* 2 (1998): 65–93; here 70, 91.

La Vieille's intention is to corrupt Fair Welcoming, whether male or female. She is coaching a convert, a more sophisticated version of herself when she was young, who, with his/her youth and beauty, will be able to wreak vengeance on the men who now turn up their noses at the Old Woman. La Vieille wants to arm Fair Welcoming with her own hard-won understanding of the game of love so that together they will be able to take control of men and amass the fortune the Old Woman kept letting slip through her fingers until it was too late. She is teaching Fair Welcoming to exploit sex; to use men and keep from being used by them; to make sex his/her life's work and means of support. The Old Woman, then, is attempting to corrupt this young person's understanding of desire and its possibilities by substituting exploitation of the other person for any notion of love.

When the goods for sale are sexual attractiveness, they are certain to lose their marketability. Virtually elegiacally and with rich sexual symbolism, the Old Woman laments her door that had once been opened again and again and now stands on the doorsill day after day and night after night. "Nus n'i vient hui ne n'i vint hier, / pensae je, lasse chetive! / En tristeur esteut que je vive"⁵⁸ ("No one comes today, and no one came yesterday," I thought. "Miserable wretch! I must live in sadness"). The same men who desired her so much they could never be satisfied by her now look the other way as they pass her by. The Old Woman sounds as if she thinks about sex only as woman's means of increasing wealth, but sex is her way of injuring men as well as exploiting them. Both the woman and the man are engaged in acts of predatory violence in her imagery for intercourse: "Et s'ele pluseurs en acroche / qui metre la vueillent en broche"⁵⁹ ("And if she hooks several of them who want to put her on the spit").

The Old Woman is a nightmare summary of why women should be feared. Women are greedy, lustful, power-hungry liars and cheats, and they are good at their work. This strident, virulent voice is bizarrely intolerant of any human impulse related to sexual relations; it is dedicated to reducing to hire and salary all attraction from one sex to the other. The voice of Jean de Meun's Old Woman, loud and clear, proclaims the male message of misogyny.

By the fourteenth century, then, the old woman had turned into an important intertext in medieval literature. She had begun—unless a traditional, unwritten figure proceeds her, as I suspect—as the shadowy, sketchily drawn Anus of *Pamphilus* whose social class is clear only from her complaints about her poverty, and who speaks stately, ponderous, rather academic Latin in a text full of classical allusions and rhetorical devices. Through the fabliaux and the *Roman de la rose*, she had acquired another voice altogether. When Jean Brasdefer adapted *Pamphilus*

⁵⁸ Guillaume, *Le Roman*, lines 12806–08.

⁵⁹ Guillaume, *Le Roman*, lines 13571–72.

into Old French as *Pamphile et Galatée*,⁶⁰ early in the fourteenth century, (his adaptation is three times as long as the original), he turned the Anus into an even more realistically portrayed villager than any of the fabliau go-betweens had been. Not only does his Houdée worry about appropriate matters for a woman of her status, she even uses colloquial language and the grammar of excited speech.

Jean develops extensively every aspect usually linked to the old woman figure. Again and again he returns to Houdée's ancientness: "Fronchie estoit et esdentee, / Si vielle que flairoit le bierre"⁶¹ (She was wrinkled and toothless, so old that she smelled of the bier). When Houdée describes herself to Pamphile, she bewails her age: "'Vielleche, li suer a la Mort, / Par vis, par dens, par out me mort, / S'ai maintes gouttes en leskine'"⁶² ("Old age, Death's sister, is killing me—my face, my teeth, all parts of me—and my spine is full of gout").⁶³ And she returns to the subject pathetically: "'Vielle sui, vieulz, et ma viellesche / Atrait avarisse et peresche . . . Vieulz est qui vieuls est.'"⁶⁴ ("I am old, base, and my old age attracts avarice and sloth . . . An old person is a vile person.") To hide her real profession of going between, Houdée carries a rosary made from carved cherry pits.⁶⁵ Jean is clearly working much more from traditional representations of this figure than from *Pamphilus* itself. At one point in his adaptation he even mentions Auberee. Houdée denounces her neighbor as the daughter of "dame Aubree"—no one in the world could choose a worse enemy.⁶⁶ The Latin Comedies may well not have influenced the French fabliaux, as many scholars argue, but by the fourteenth century, the offspring of these two genres had come together.

At several points, Houdée speaks lively, appropriate, colloquial language associated with life in the country. For instance, when she tries to interest Galatée in Pamphile, she nudges her forward with: "'Li boins et li biaux, ten mary, / Bien poroiez dire 'hary'!"⁶⁷ ("A good, handsome man for your husband, you should be saying 'Giddyap!'"). The remarkable features of Houdée's voice and concerns are most evident in the scene in which she traps Galatée in her house so that Pamphile can rape her. Both in what Houdée says and in how she says it, Houdée emerges as a poor villager speaking from the experiences and commonplaces of everyday village life. Here, covering her tracks as she returns from having abandoned the pleading Galatée, Houdée denounces: "'me commere Berte'" ("that gossip

⁶⁰ Morawski, ed., *Pamphile*.

⁶¹ Morawski, ed., *Pamphile*, verses 908–09.

⁶² Morawski, ed., *Pamphile*, verses 995–97.

⁶³ For discussions of how gout could affect old people in the Middle Ages, see the contribution to this volume by Rasma Lazda-Cazers.

⁶⁴ Morawski, ed., *Pamphile*, verses 1918–19; 1922.

⁶⁵ Morawski, ed., *Pamphile*, verses 1261–64.

⁶⁶ Morawski, ed., *Pamphile*, verses 2347–49.

⁶⁷ Morawski, ed., *Pamphile*, verses 1087–88. See also verses 1001–02, 1487–89, 2078–79.

Bertha"), who allegedly called her away: "'Sui je bien aise / De chelle sote orde punaise!'" ("I am well rid of that stinking, filthy fool!") "'Abuissie est a une buisse, / Si qu'elle a brisiet le cuisse'" ("She tripped on a chain and broke her thigh"). In the quarrel they allegedly just finished, Bertha, "'en plain quarrouge'" ("right at the village crossroad"), told Houdée that she would give her a bloody nose, "'le bec rouge'" ("the red beak"), because when she (Bertha) puts her hens on the nest, Houdée attracts them and makes them lay in her house. "'Mais se je ne l'en fai semondre, / Que j'aie la teste brisie! / Aultre fois se soit avisie'" ("But if I don't have her hauled into court, I've got a cracked skull coming! She'd better look out another time!"). Bertha also accused her of making a hank of yarn out of her tow, Houdée complains: "'Suy je larenesse d'estouppes?'" ("Am I a tow thief?"), and she regrets her wasted acts of neighborliness, having given Bertha soup made out of her vegetables and straw to stuff her mattress with.⁶⁸ In the specifics of village life and a housewife's responsibilities—managing hens, stuffing straw mattresses, making soup, spinning yarn—the Anus from *Pamphilus* comes to vibrant life.

Houdée also speaks in country proverbs and generalized folk wisdom, either already proverbial or on its way to becoming proverbial. For instance, she concludes her denunciation of Bertha with "'Qui laron des fourques raccate, / Un anemy mortel accate'"⁶⁹ ("Whoever rescues a thief from the gallows wins a mortal enemy"). This proverb was so popular that the editor of *Pamphile et Galatée* lists fourteen other versions of it, including a twentieth-century version which translates "Cut down the hanged man and he'll hang you." Proverbialness is a very distinctive attribute of Houdée's speech. The Anus in *Pamphilus* had used proverbs, but Houdée's language is many times over as proverbial as hers. Moreover, Houdée's proverbs match the proverbs of the old woman who goes between in *Éracle*. It seems likely that proverbs, like ancientness, had become a traditional feature of this figure.

The most spectacular collection of old women who go between in medieval literature occurs in another early fourteenth-century work, the Spanish *Libro de buen amor*.⁷⁰ There old women arrange, or try to arrange, six different relationships for the alleged author, Juan Ruiz, Archpriest of Hita.⁷¹ Jean Brasdefer's Houdée, despite her realistic details of village life, often sounds like a pedant. She lectures, makes jokes that are so learned that they are almost impenetrable,⁷² and cites most of the formidable list of authorities mentioned in the poem. All these are

⁶⁸ Morawski, ed., *Pamphile*, verses 2326–46.

⁶⁹ Morawski, ed., *Pamphile*, verses 2366–67.

⁷⁰ Ruiz, *Libro*; Mignani, transl. *Book*.

⁷¹ Scholars suspect Juan Ruiz is a pseudonym, since no other trace of such a person has been found. Mignani, *Book*, 26–27.

⁷² Morawski, ed., *Pamphile*, see verses 1423, 1772–76, for example.

exaggerated aspects of the speech of the Anus in *Pamphilus*. In the *Libro de buen amor*, however, despite the fact that the *Libro*'s longest section is a reworking of the story of Pamphilus and Galatea, all trace of the clerkishness of *Pamphilus* has disappeared. Quite splendidly, the folk wisdom and proverbialness of speech of the earlier old women have now emerged as one of the go-between's defining characteristics. Trotaconventos (Convent Trotter), for instance, argues that a widow will be seducible: "non ay mula de alvarda / que la troxa non consienta. / La çera que es mucho dura / e mucho brozna e elada, / desque ya entre las manos / una vez está maznada, / después con el poco fuego / çient vezes será doblada" ("There isn't a pack mule that won't accept the saddle. Wax which has stiffened from the cold becomes soft after it has been handled once, and then just a little warmth makes it quite pliable again").⁷³ When Urraca, another of these old women, returns from a successful episode of going between she announces, "El que al lobo enbía, / ja la fe!, carne espera" ("If you send the wolf you expect meat").⁷⁴ Once Trotaconventos has gotten Lady Sloeberry (Galatea) to agree to visit at her home, the old woman rushes to the house of Sir Badger (Pamphilus), counseling him to make good on the opportunity she is providing him: "quando te dan la cabrilla, / acorre con la soguilla" ("When they give you the goat, run with the rope").⁷⁵ Sex is blatantly a commodity in the *Libro*. These richly portrayed old women act straightforwardly as procurers, bringing on a procession of women for the Archpriest and his surrogates. The lineal descendants of two centuries of old women, they are retired prostitutes who lay snares and dig traps; liars, peddlers, and experts in magic potions who walk about town holding up their huge rosaries to God.

As is well known, medieval medical beliefs, based on Aristotle, conceptualized woman as an incomplete male, doomed to femaleness because her sex organs, which matched the male's, remained internal, undescended because of insufficient generative heat at the time of conception. Women, then, were colder than men, and menstruation was understood as a means of purifying the female body, too cold to burn off its own poisons as male bodies did.⁷⁶ What is perhaps less well known is that old women were considered far more defective than simply incomplete males. Since the toxins previously fluxed in dreaded menstrual fluid remained damned up in their post-menopausal bodies, old women gave off vapors that could poison and that empowered their evil. According to preachers, old

⁷³ Ruiz, *Libro*; Mignani, transl., *Book*, stanza 710–11.

⁷⁴ Ruiz, *Libro*; Mignani, transl., *Book*, stanza 1328.

⁷⁵ Ruiz, *Libro*; Mignani, transl., *Book*, stanza 870.

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Robertson, "Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality in the *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of Norwich's *Showings*," *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury. New Cultural Studies (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 142–67; here 143–45, 147.

women were the devil's mouth, and he used them to seduce men or kill sleeping babies by sucking their blood.⁷⁷ Aquinas believed the devil gave old women their dreaded evil eye as payment for pacts they made with him, and by it they could poison babies in cradles and cast spells so powerful that even priests and theologians suffered from them.⁷⁸

The old woman figure of medieval literature may have begun as an in-joke for clerics in *Pamphilus*, with little reference to any contemporary ideas about old women, but given the extraordinary and long lived popularity of *Pamphilus* itself, this figure must have very rapidly appealed to other aspects of its audience. The old women in the literature after *Pamphilus* move farther and farther away from their connections with clerkishness until the go-betweens in the *Libro* are quite clearly the old women the preachers and moralists had been denouncing for centuries. Stories like Boccaccio's about the ancient message carrier and the anonymous tale of the bed trick played on Ovid feed on male revulsion at old female bodies. Baucis, witch and procurer, is the poisonous old woman incarnate, and so are the Anus in *Pamphilus*, Aubere, Dame Sirith, La Vieille, Houdée, and the many go-betweens of the *Libro de buen amor*. The cultural function this literature was performing, then, was to fuel the Middle Age's conception of old women: disgusting, crafty, dangerous, serving the devil by serving themselves. The hateful old women in these major medieval works are no oddity, no accident. They speak from the heart of medieval culture and its beliefs about old women.

⁷⁷ Agrimi, "Savoir médical," 1298, 1302.

⁷⁸ Agrimi, "Savoir médical," 1303, 1298.

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De vetula: the Figure of the Old Woman in Medieval French Literature¹

Although the figure of the old woman in medieval French literature must bear some relation to the elderly female in medieval reality, representations of old women in male-authored texts of the Middle Ages are primarily products of a long tradition of clerical misogyny.² Influenced by the classical figure of the tale-telling bawd turned go-between, the elderly female in Old French literature is usually portrayed as immoral, repulsive, and dangerous.³ Despite the often comic contexts for her activities, her portrait reveals deep anxieties about her power and potential influence (especially on young women) and the literary treatment of her is predominantly unsympathetic.⁴ However, as Howard Bloch has shown, the discourse of misogyny deconstructs itself,⁵ and despite the powerful negative tradition of the *vetula* which we shall trace below, medieval fiction does allow us glimpses of a more sympathetic figure. This positive image may be the result of

¹ This article is a fully revised version of a paper originally presented to the London Medieval Society in 1998 and to the Gender and Life Cycle in the Middle Ages conference held in Canterbury, Kent in January 2000. I have unfortunately not been able to consult Gretchen Mieszkowski's *Medieval Go-Betweens and Chaucer's Pandarus*, The New Middle Ages (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), as this book is not yet available in Britain. See Albrecht Classen's review in *Mediaevistik* (forthcoming).

² See R. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) and Heather M. Arden, "La Vieille Femme dans la littérature médiévale: sexualité et narrativité," *Europäische Literaturen im Mittelalter: Mélanges en l'honneur de Wolfgang Spiewok à l'occasion de son 65ème anniversaire*, ed. Danielle Buschinger. Greifswalder Beiträge zum Mittelalter, 15 (Greifswald: Reineke Verlag, 1994), 1–7.

³ See Jan M. Ziolkowski, "Old Wives' Tales: Classicism and Anti-Classicism from Apuleius to Chaucer," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 12 (2002): 90–113, who shows how classical Latin and medieval texts reveal the risks to the impressionable young of allowing lascivious, alcoholic, illogical, socially mobile old women to tell their *fabulae*. Medieval theologians cite I Timothy 4. 7 as an authoritative warning against "aniles fabulas" (old womens' tales).

⁴ Indeed, the humorous treatment of old age might be a way of dealing with such deep-seated anxiety about human mortality. See Philippe Ménard, *Le Rire et le sourire dans le roman courtois en France au moyen âge (1150–1250)* (Geneva: Droz, 1969), 157, who talks of exorcizing fear through laughter.

⁵ See R. Howard Bloch, "Medieval Misogyny," *Representations* 20 (1987): 1–24, esp. 19.

authors' real-life experience of elderly relatives, but it may also derive from the didactic tradition, which suggested socially beneficial roles for the aged, at the same time as warning against the misuse of one's twilight years.

Medieval didactic writers adopted slightly different systems for identifying the ages of man, yet they all seem to have read the human life-cycle symbolically, invoking analogies with God's creation of the world and the Christian conception of history.⁶ This symbolization had a profound effect on their interpretation of the progressive stages of human life. In *On Genesis against the Manicheans* St Augustine of Hippo presents a seven-part system based on the seven days of creation. Here, old age is characterized by a return to a more spiritual phase of life. Later, in his *83 Different Questions* he identifies six ages of man, with old age beginning at 60 and extending up to 120 years.⁷ Isidore of Seville continues the analogical tradition in his *Etymologies*, in which he divides human life into six or seven parts, which are then associated with periods of Biblical or Salvation History:⁸

0–7: childhood (*infantia*) = from Adam to Noah

7–14: *pueritia* = from Noah to Abraham

14–28: adolescence (*adolescentia*) = from Abraham to David

28–50: youth (*iuventus*) = from David to the Babylonian captivity

50–70: maturity (*gravitas*) = from the Babylonian captivity to the Incarnation of our Savior

70–: old age (*senectus*) = from the present age until the end of the world.

This last stage is further divided, with the later years (*senies*) characterized by senility and decrepitude (*Etymologies*, 11, 2: 8). Despite the comparison of old age with the last period before the Apocalypse, Isidore claims that old age brings with it both advantages and disadvantages: "Senectus autem multa secum et bona adfert et mala" (11, 2: 30). On the negative side, old age is wretched as it is accompanied by weakness and bad temper "Mala autem, quia senium miserrimum est debilitate et odio" (11, 2: 30). It is also characterized by a decrease in the "senses,"⁹ as the "etymology" of the Latin term for the old, *senes*, suggests:

⁶ See the contributions to this volume by Harry Peters (for the late Middle Ages), and Anouk Janssen (for the early modern period in art history).

⁷ See Georges Minois, *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, transl. by Sarah Hanbury Tenison (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 115 and J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

⁸ Compare Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, Book 11, chapter 2: "De aetatibus hominum" (On the Ages of Man) and Book 5, chapter 38: "De saeculis et aetatibus" (Of Generations and Ages). For the text consult: <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/L/Roman/Texts/Isidore/home.html> (last accessed on Jan. 14, 2007). Medieval theory on old age owes a great deal to Cicero's *De senectute*.

⁹ The term "sensus" here means both "sensations" and "common sense", for, Isidore argues, people lose their wits as they grow older.

Senes autem quidam dictos putant a sensus diminutione, eo quod iam per vetustatem desipiant. (*Etymologies*, 11, 2: 27)

On the other hand, liberated from the tyranny of erotic desire through impotence, the old can become wiser and give more mature counsel:¹⁰

Bona, quia nos ab inpotentissimis dominis liberat, voluptatibus inponit modum, libidinis frangit impetus, auget sapientiam, dat maturiora consilia. (11, 2: 30).

The ambivalence displayed by medieval thinkers toward the elderly can be detected in the literary texts too, although the predominant attitude is negative, especially when old age is equated with the decadence of the world in its pre-apocalyptic state. Not only was decrepitude in the individual seen as a punishment for sin, but around the end of the last millennium it was also thought that the human race was in its senile sixth age and people waited with trepidation for the Second Coming and the Last Judgment. Indeed, some critics argue that the thirteenth-century prose romance *La Mort le roi Artu* illustrates the Millenarian teachings of Joachim de Fiore (who expected the Second Coming of Christ in 1260), the advanced ages of its Arthurian protagonists reflecting the decadence of a civilisation rushing toward its apocalyptic finale.¹¹ Moreover, whilst the *puer senex*, a young man acting with the wisdom of old age, is a laudable figure, *senes pueriles* (old men acting rashly like the young) are not—a further reason for the downfall of Lancelot, Arthur and Gawain in this text.¹²

The equation of senility with a second childhood, the Christian doctrine of obedience to divine rather than parental authority (see Matt. 10.35–37), and the belief that the sufferings of the aged were punishment for sin, were all factors which led to a lack of respect for the elderly. This attitude can be seen in the Old French epic, where troops of young, unmarried knights often pour scorn on the fighting skills of the more mature knights. For example, in the *Roman de Thèbes* the *juvenes* laugh at the white beards of their elders, whom they compare to sheep (4900–08).¹³ However, such scorn is not necessarily condoned by the author, for it is the young knights suffering from *desmesure* (lack of moderation) who meet with

¹⁰ Scott Taylor, in his contribution to this volume, uncovers similar perspectives in the writings of the Chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson.

¹¹ See Valerie Lagorio, "The Apocalyptic Mode in the Vulgate Cycle of Arthurian Romances," *Philological Quarterly* 57 (1978): 1–22.

¹² See Douglas Kelly, "Age and the Ages of Life in the *Prose Lancelot*," *The Lancelot-Grail Cycle: Text and Transformations*, ed. William W. Kibler (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 51–66. For a more sympathetic view of the aging heroes, see Karen Pratt, *La Mort le roi Artu*. Critical Guides to French Texts (London: Grant and Cutler, 2004), chapter 2.

¹³ *Le Roman de Thèbes*, ed. Guy Raynaud de Lage, Les Classiques français du moyen âge, 94 (Paris: Champion, 1969), vol. I.

premature deaths, while the older warriors are associated with more sensible and more effective tactics.¹⁴

In fact, the strongly moralistic, indeed pessimistic view of old age, whose physical torments could be seen as punishment for the fall, coexisted with a more positive attitude toward the experience and wisdom which could come from a long life. For example, in the *Chanson de Roland*, Naimon is a medieval Nestor, respected for his good advice. Also in this epic we find the positive influence of the long-lived Biblical patriarchs: Charlemagne and the emir Baligant both having achieved ages in three figures, while their prowess is barely diminished. It seems therefore that conflicting Christian models and also conflicting heroic models led to ambiguity and variety in medieval literary depictions of advanced age.¹⁵

Amongst all the extant medieval texts which were written either *by* young men or *for* them, Philippe de Novarre's *Les Quatre Ages de l'homme* is exceptional, being the work of an old man. A former soldier, diplomat, and lawyer, Philippe wrote his treatise in prose on the life-cycle of man around 1260, when he was at least 70 years old. He identifies four ages of man: *anfance*, *jovant*, *moien aage* and *vieillece*, each comprising 20 years.¹⁶ In each section he treats first men, then women. His work is both descriptive and prescriptive, giving moral advice on how to behave well and how to avoid the pitfalls of each age.

Even before we reach the section devoted to the elderly, some of his remarks on *moien aage* (perhaps "the prime of life" rather than middle age) are relevant to our subject. In paragraphs 36–38 he says that some people claim that the "middle-aged" have lost much of their worth and knowledge, that they are forgetful and confused, have entered their second childhood and therefore merit only the respect due to children. Yet Philippe disagrees, arguing that people who express such beliefs are reluctant to take good advice and tend to speak out rashly at council meetings. He then cites an example from the *Prose Lancelot*, which he says contains "mout de biaux diz et des soutis" (§ 37; many fair and subtle words), in which Farien chides his nephew Lanbague for being the first to speak in the presence of "assez de viaus et de sages" (§ 37; many wise old men). Thus the wisdom of the mature is especially appreciated in council, although Farien advises

¹⁴ For a discussion of generational antagonism in the *Roman de Thèbes*, see Karen Pratt, "Reading Epic through Romance: the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Roman de Thèbes*," *Reading Around the Epic*, ed. Marianne Ailes, Philip Bennett and Karen Pratt (London: King's College London, 1997), 101–27.

¹⁵ See Phyllis Gaffney, "The Ages of Man in Old French Verse Epic and Romance," *Modern Language Review* 85 (1990): 570–82. For similar cases of conflicting views toward old age in German medieval literature, see the contribution to this volume by Albrecht Classen.

¹⁶ Philippe de Navarre, *Des .IIII. tenz d'aage d'ome*, ed. Marcel de Fréville, SATF (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1888), paragraph 1.

Lanbague not to wait for the old when deeds of bravery are required (§ 37)—i.e., horses for courses.

Philippe's section on old age (§§166–87) begins with advice on securing one's salvation—now is the time (before entering one's second childhood), with God's grace, to mend one's ways, atone for previous sins and thank God that one has lived long enough to end one's life virtuously.¹⁷ The *memento mori* and *vanitas vanitatum* themes are combined to encourage the rich elderly to buy their salvation through alms-giving. After all, inherited wealth can harm heirs, and young widows will only give all the money to their new husbands or lovers. Here we recognize an antifeminist commonplace of the type which abounds in Philippe's paragraphs on women. Children fare no better though, for we are told that they will fail to spend their inheritance winning their father's salvation.

Old age is characterized by travail and suffering (§173); old men should not ape the young, especially sexually, by taking a wife. For if she is young, the husband will be jealous;¹⁸ if, however, the man takes an old wife, Philippe depicts the consequences graphically: “.ii. pouretures en .i. lit ne sont mi afferables” (§173; two rotting bodies in one bed are not very fitting). Old men are warned against the sin of *luxuria*, yet it seems many are saved by their inability to perform, and they are advised not to try to overcome their virtuous impotence. God in particular hates an aged lecher, but an old man stained by pride is no less reprehensible. It seems that sins which are acceptable, though not condoned, in the young, are unforgivable in the old and in the story of Lucifer's fall through pride Philippe even hints that man's ugliness in old age is also often attributable to sin (§175).

After an excursus on the main deadly sins, Philippe returns to the virtue of alms-giving and rewarding one's servants. Old age enables us to atone for the faults of “simple anface” and “perilleus jovant,” the old man being compared to someone who pays all his debts before setting out on a dangerous journey. In his summary at the end of the work, Philippe equates childhood with “soffrance” or patience, youth with service, prime of life with “valor” and old age with honor, since it is honorable to end one's life in virtue. Thus although his didactic aim obliges him to linger on the dangers of each time of life, his work also suggests that the elderly can provide positive role-models for the young.

When Philippe turns his attention to women (§§ 182–85), he first describes virtuous, socially beneficial activities for older females—they should spend their time alms-giving, helping the deserving poor, fasting, doing penance, praying,

¹⁷ Exactly the same point is made by Jean Gerson, see the contribution to this volume by Scott Taylor.

¹⁸ Here one is reminded of the *mal mariée* in Marie de France's *Lais* and other courtly texts: a young girl wedded to an old husband and locked in a tower often guarded by an old woman or *vetula*, see below. See also Susanne Fritsch-Staar, *Unglückliche Ehefrauen: Zum deutschsprachigen “malmariée”-Lied*. Philologische Studien und Quellen, 134 (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1995).

being helpful in the house, looking after children and arranging marriages. Their pious lives should provide a good example to the young, to whom they must offer sound counsel and warn against sin. Some of this advice anticipates what Christine de Pizan will say nearly two centuries later in her *Livre des trois vertus*,¹⁹ though it is interesting to note that her book does not categorize women primarily by age, but rather by social, marital and professional status. However, Christine does not repeat the traditional slurs on female sexual mores which follow when Philippe considers “aucunes mauveses vieilles” (§184), those evil old women who commit sins of the flesh. These women he reproaches for wearing make-up and fine clothes, dyeing their hair and refusing to accept that they are “vieilles ne remeses” — old and finished. The latter term is applied only to women in this work, implying that they are of no social use when they are past child-bearing age and no longer attractive to men. According to Philippe, these women are so desperate that they often have to buy sex with gifts or money, and eventually “give back all their little knives” (§185). This intriguing expression can be explained by consulting an anecdote related in the section on *moien aage* (§§163–64). The woman in question enjoys sex when young and receives many love tokens in the form of little knives. But as she grows older and loses her attractions she has to buy her lovers’ favors, gradually returning all the gifts she has received. Thus the woman who has run out of knives to return is the one no longer able to attract lovers.²⁰ Philippe’s conclusion on the difference between men’s and women’s susceptibility to *luxuria* is instructive: men are more concerned with their honor and reputation than women, but though tempted, old men are often incapable of love-making. Women, on the other hand, are always capable and are flattered when men make love to them, not realizing that their age makes them contemptible. These are the two reasons why women are the more immoral sex.

It is this sexual aspect of old women which is most emphasized in the courtly and didactic literature of the Middle Ages written by male authors in the tradition of Ovid. As Christine de Pizan perceptively notes, women of all ages received a bad press from her contemporaries, largely because most books were written by men.²¹ Moreover, she implies that many authors who complained about women were *old* men, whose anger over their impotence was turned against the opposite sex (*Epistre*, 336–40). While not admitting this openly, Philippe’s words confirm our suspicion that masculine anxiety over impotence may well lie at the root of

¹⁹ See Christine de Pizan, *Le Livre des trois vertus*, ed. Charity Cannon Willard and Eric Hicks. Bibliothèque du XV^e siècle, 50 (Paris: Champion, 1989), III, 197–200.

²⁰ It is noteworthy that a little knife is also mentioned as a present for a lady in the *Roman de la rose*, ed. Daniel Poirion (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1974), line 14417.

²¹ See Christine de Pizan, *Epistre au dieu d’amors* in *Poems of Cupid, God of Love*, ed. Thelma Fenster and Mary Carpenter Erler (Leiden: Brill, 1990), lines 407–11.

much antifeminist propaganda and moral outrage at the supposedly insatiable libido of older females.²²

As Christine's *Epistre* (365–88) clearly implies, the medieval discourse of misogyny owes much to the writings of Ovid, and it is from him that medieval clerics have taken the figure of the old woman as go-between.²³ The Ovidian prototype for the *vetula* was Dipsas in *Amores*, book 1, chapter 8, where in a mere 114 lines we find almost all of the attributes which become characteristic of the *vieille* in medieval French literature.²⁴ Ovid, as first-person narrator, claims to overhear an old woman give advice to his young mistress. Dipsas is not described flatteringly—she has sparse white hair, bleary eyes and wrinkled cheeks; she drinks, indulges in magic, knows about aphrodisiacs, and can raise the dead. She pretends to work for the male narrator as procuress. However, her linguistic skills can be employed against him, as he discovers when he overhears her teaching the girl how to trick, catch, and fleece men. She advises dressing well and wearing make-up to capture a rich suitor, whose wealth will benefit the old woman as well as the girl. She tells her not to hold back, but to take several lovers, preferably wealthy men rather than poets (I, 8, 57–58), and no impoverished aristocrats. Catching men is likened to birdcatching—men are to be caught in her net (I, 8, 69–70). Sexual favors should be distributed in moderation, just enough to acquire plenty of presents. And she should learn to weep at will. Dipsas reassures her that the gods will not punish her for deceiving her lover, as lovers' deceptions are minor peccadilloes (I, 8, 86). Relatives and her nurse should be recruited to help elicit gifts from the lover (I, 8, 91), and an element of competition will provide enough healthy jealousy to keep him interested. When she has accepted lots of presents, the girl should ask for a loan, which she never repays. These are the

²² James A. Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), 175–88, offers very similar views regarding the tensions affecting courtly society in general around 1200.

²³ In her *Mediation and Love: A Study of the Medieval Go-Between in Key Romance and Near-Eastern Texts*. Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, 93 (Leiden, Boston, and Cologne: Brill, 1999), chapter 1, Leyla Rouhi demonstrates how the classical figure of the *lena* or procuress for a Roman courtesan is perceived in elegiac poetry primarily as the male lover's enemy, onto whom he can deflect any anger provoked by his beloved's reluctance to give him sole rights to her body (14–15, 41). On the other hand, the Ovidian mediator can also be the male's ally in the game of love and in the case of the young maid servant acting as go-between, may even be sexualized in his eyes (50). No doubt these various classical traditions, which Ovid exploits in his different works on love, gave rise to some of the ambivalence toward the elderly *entremetteuse* expressed by medieval narrators/lovers. On medieval bawds, see William Matthews, "The Wife of Bath and All of Her Sect," *Viator* 5 (1974): 413–43.

²⁴ See *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended: An Anthology of Medieval Texts*, ed. Alcuin Blamires with Karen Pratt and C. W. Marx (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 21–23. For the text of the *Amores*, see <http://www.tonykline.co.uk/klineasamores.htm> (last accessed on Jan. 14, 2007).

fruits of the old woman's lifetime of experience (I, 8, 105), at which point Ovid's presence is noticed and he curses the hag with the tribulations of old age.

The Ovidian *vetula* gave to medieval literature a somewhat contradictory figure, whose loyalties to men and women were often divided. In all cases though, the old woman is clever and a mistress of deception: her main assets being her experience, verbal dexterity, and sometimes her magic arts. In the Latin comedy and vernacular *fabliau* traditions she helps the male protagonist to seduce the young girl, seeming to derive vicarious pleasure from the seduction while also earning rich rewards. In *Panphilus*, a Latin comedy of the mid twelfth century, the heroine Galatea is practically raped by Panphilus in the house of the female go-between who has been advising him.²⁵ In the *fabliau*, "D'Auberee la vielle maquerelle," Auberee invents a complicated ruse to remove the husband from the scene, yet the bourgeoisie wife is nevertheless seduced against her will in the procuress's house by her young lover (316–63).²⁶ His courtly protestations (367–68) cannot disguise the violence of the seduction, facilitated by Auberee, who has laid the plan and locked the door. Whilst the bawd's fat fee may be cause for criticism (117, 652), there is little condemnation by the narrator of the old woman's behavior in helping the young man; on the contrary her verbal trickery is condoned (105, 178, 220–22, 442).²⁷ In an English *fabliau* written ca. 1272–1283 and preserved in Oxford, Bodleian, MS. Digby 86, the eponymous heroine Dame Sirith is another go-between intent on getting a rich reward. However, she uses less force and more ingenuity in bringing success to the young suitor. She tells the object of his affections that she will be turned into a dog if she does not relent, for this happened to Dame Sirith's own daughter. She then produces as proof her dog, whose tears have been artificially induced with pepper and mustard.²⁸

A more courtly treatment of the *vieille* is to be found in the twelfth-century romance of *Eracle* by Gautier d'Arras.²⁹ Here the love between the married

²⁵ *Three Latin Comedies*, ed. Keith Bate, Toronto Medieval Latin Texts, 6 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976). See also Heather Arden, "La Vieille femme", 4–5, on the Old French version of the story by Jean Bras-de-Fer: *Pamphile et Galatée*.

²⁶ "D'Auberee la vielle maquerelle" in *Selected Fabliaux*, ed. B. J. Levy, Hull French Texts (Hull: University of Hull, 1978). The eastern origin of this tale points to another rich and influential source of ideas about old women: near-eastern literature (see Rouhi, *Mediation*, p. 100 and chapter 3).

²⁷ Moreover, the author seems to admire Auberee's skill in reassuring the husband once he and his wife have been tricked (653–54), and the moral to the story is hardly ethical: that women commit sins only at the instigation of other women.

²⁸ For text and English translation, see <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/dstxt.htm> and <http://www.unc.edu/~jwittig/51/sirith.htm> (last accessed on Jan. 13, 2007). *The Book of the Wiles of Women* (*El libro de los engaños e los asayamientos de las mugeres*), transl. from the Arabic into Spanish in 1253, contains a similar story of an old woman's deception, see *Woman Defamed and Woman Defended*, 130–34.

²⁹ Quotations are taken from my forthcoming edition and translation: *Gautier d'Arras, Eracle*, ed. Karen

empress Athanaïs (wrongly locked in a tower by her husband and thus a sort of *mal mariée*) and young Paridés is mutual and so no force is required. The old woman is initially summoned by Paridés's mother to diagnose her son's illness, which is, of course, unrequited love (4011–210).³⁰ Her main qualifications for the job are her experience of life, her medical knowledge, and her ability to devise a cunning plan. Although herbs and potions are not required in this tale, this *vieille* is closely related to Thessala in Chrétien de Troyes's contemporary romance *Cligés*. Thessala is Fénice's nurse and *confidante* who enables her to preserve her virginity for her lover by brewing two potions: one to give Fénice's husband the illusion that he is making love to his wife, and the other to simulate her death, so that she can escape her marriage. Thessala's expertise in magic makes her the literary granddaughter of Medea and the grandmother of Juliet's nurse.³¹

In *Eracle*, however, it is the old woman's powers of rhetoric and clever psychology which enable her to diagnose the malady of both the young man and the empress.³² In so doing she dispenses traditional advice to Paridés about women, namely that a man should not appear to be too keen, otherwise the lady will become too proud, and she invokes her own experience, admitting that she was fickle when young and did not love those who really loved her. She would take the money of genuine suitors and squander it on good-for-nothings:

Jel di por moi, qui feme sui;
Ja ai je fait maint home anui
Quant je estoie jovene touse;
Je n'amaisse home por Toulouse,
Por qu'il m'amast, ains l'amusoie,
Ne mais du sien tos jors prenoie;
A ceus le donoie a droiture
Qui de m'amor n'avoient cure; (4153–60)

[I know because I am a woman; I have in the past caused many men pain, when I was a young wench I would not have loved a man for all the wealth of Toulouse

Pratt, King's College London Medieval Studies (London: King's College London Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 2007).

³⁰ Gautier's *vieille* is a *confidante* who shares some features with the Ovidian go-between and some with the governess/mother figure who advises on matters of love or diagnoses lovesickness in the *Roman de Troie* and *Roman d'Eneas*. See Rouhi, *Mediation*, 72–73.

³¹ See Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligés*, ed. Alexandre Micha. *Les Classiques français du moyen âge*, 84 (Paris: Champion, 1975), lines 2962–93, in which Thessala is compared to Medea, and Rouhi, *Mediation*, 76–79.

³² Although the Persian physician Avicenna suggests employing old women to dissuade the young from inappropriate passion, he does admit that the opposite effect might be achieved, thus recognizing the aged *confidante*'s powers of verbal manipulation which Gautier portrays so effectively in his *Eracle*. See Rouhi, *Mediation*, 144–45.

just because he loved me; instead I strung him along. However, I always took his money, and I gave it straight away to those who were not interested in my love.]

While such details are found in antifeminist texts as warnings to male lovers that they might be exploited by women, the *vieille*'s tale of personal misfortune may be seen as a precursor to the more moving biographies of Jean de Meun's *vieille* and especially to François Villon's "Belle Heaulmière" (see below).

At this point the old woman offers to procure for Paridés any woman he wants, singing her own praises and providing a rather uncourtly version of the religion of love:

Il n'i a nule, se je voel,
Que je ne face en mon diu croire;
Je parol bien d'el que d'estoire,
De patre nostre et d'evangile;
Tant sai de barat et de gile
Que vostres bons ert accomplis,
Se c'ert nes li empereïs.» (4174–80)

[If I put my mind to it there is no woman whom I cannot persuade to believe in my god: and I am not talking about the God of holy scripture, the lord's prayer and the gospels: I am such an expert in trickery and deception that you will have your heart's desire, even if it is the empress herself.]

Paridés declares his love on hearing the empress mentioned, and after a similar interview with Athanaïs, arranged on the pretext of offering her a basket of ripe cherries (these old women are often gardeners!), the *vieille* realizes that their love is mutual and that her task will therefore be easy. This is where the mercenary aspect of the character is stressed and treated with some humor. Old women are usually rewarded with food and clothing, as well as money. This detail of course reflects medieval reality in that the aged were often poor and in need of warmth and sustenance. However, the eagerness with which the women extract rewards from all and sundry suggests that they are tainted by greed and gluttony, the food probably also having connotations of lechery. In *Eracle*, the woman is rewarded first by Paridés's mother with a coat and some money, after emphasising her wretched condition by calling herself a "vielle piaucelue" (4119): an old bag of bones.³³ In conversation with the empress she huddles up to the fire and cleverly stretches out her arms and legs to display her worn-out clothing:

³³ The phrase "vieille peaucelue" is also employed by Jean LeFèvre in his *Lamentations de Matheolus*, II, 1819. See Jean Le Fèvre, *Les Lamentations de Matheolus et le Livre de Leësce*, ed. by A.-G. Van Hamel (Paris: Bouillon, 1892 & 1905). Gautier's *vieille* exploits the misfortunes of old age rather like Celestina; see Connie Scarborough's contribution to this volume.

Le fu atise durement,
Et si esgarde en sus del feu.
Por traire mix le cose a preu
Mostre ses bras, mostre ses piés,
Qu'ele a mal vestus et cauchiés; (4252–56)

[She poked the fire vigorously yet looked beyond the fire; to gain greater personal advantage from the situation she displayed her arms and displayed her feet, which were poorly clad and shod.]

The empress duly promises her a present next day, but asks her to give the “surplus” (what is left over) to her lover. This is where Gautier d'Arras plays a trick on his *vieille*, thus revealing her true nature. For when she is presented with a pie in a silver dish in which Athanaïs has secreted a letter, the *vieille*, thinking the pie is for her and the dish for Paridés, curses her benefactress. She discovers the truth only when she hurls the pie to the ground in anger and finds the letter — then her praise for Athanaïs knows no bounds (4426–48).

The lovers' tryst occurs at the *vieille*'s own house, thus following the *fabliau* tradition, but departs from it in that the plan to meet is devised by the empress herself and the love-making is consensual.³⁴ The episode ends with the *vieille* being rewarded once again by the empress with a cloak and yet more money. Gautier has thus retained some of the traditional faults of the old woman, but has employed her special talents in this case to help two deserving lovers. She therefore emerges as a clever, but mildly comic, figure, and the misogyny inherent in her character is kept to a minimum.

In all the above examples the old woman aids the male lover, and this seems to win the narrator's approval, even admiration, which tempers the antifeminism attached to the traditional figure. As Heather Arden shows, it is in fact the “sexually moral” old woman whose job it is to protect the chastity of a young female, often a *mal mariée*, who is more vilified by narrators.³⁵ A further object of vilification, though, is the rarer case of the old woman who pretends to procure for a young man, whilst serving her own sexual interests.³⁶ The prototype for this

³⁴ We note here the influence of the Tristan legend, in which Iseut is traditionally ingenious and issues instructions which her lover follows.

³⁵ Arden, “La Vieille Femme”, 3. Examples of this type are to be found in Marie de France's *lais* “Yonec” and “Guigemar”, *Aucassin et Nicolette*, prose IV, and more ambiguously in *Le Roman de la rose*. The negative portrayal of these female guardians of chastity (perhaps a reflection of the Islamic harem, see Rouhi, *Mediation*, 143) no doubt stems from the authors' view that they are serving immoral lords.

³⁶ This behavior was perceived as highly transgressive, since women were meant to be by nature colder than men, and their ardour was supposed to cool further with advancing age. See Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages*, transl. Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988). The sexualized *vetula* may be an extension of the Ovidian idea of

figure is the eponymous heroine of the pseudo-Ovidian work *De vetula*, attributed (probably erroneously) to Richard de Fournival.³⁷ It was composed in the mid thirteenth century and was probably known to Jean de Meun, who completed the *Roman de la Rose* in the 1270s. The misogynist *De vetula* was translated into French in the late fourteenth century by Jean LeFèvre, and the following analysis will be based on the Middle French translation. The narrator of *La Vieille*, supposedly Ovid himself, relates how a *vetula* engaged to help him seduce a young woman tricks him into sharing her bed. The old woman is vilified throughout the retrospective narrative. Yet it is also difficult to sympathize with the male protagonist, who is a rather comic figure. The story begins with Ovid finding a suitable old woman as go-between: "Povre et de petite fortune, / Bien parlant et de beau langage." (2848–49).³⁸ She is described as poor and of small fortune, eloquent and clever with language, wise, and impoverished enough to receive gifts of food from his sister (offering us no doubt another glimpse of medieval reality). Thus she fits the traditional description, with the additional detail that she was the girl's nurse (2858–60). Her early reluctance to help because of fear of the girl's father is overcome by a multitude of gifts: a goat, wheat, beans and peas, lentils, clothes, shoes, three lengths of cloth (2924–32). After pretending for several days to act as go-between, the old woman announces that the girl is ready to receive Ovid naked in a little chamber. The lover's preparations are then related in comic detail: he seems to shave off all bodily hair, has a rest after lunch to gather his strength, eats foods to aid virility, has an aphrodisiac drink, but then reads his books so as not to fall asleep drunk (3053–64). At the appointed hour and in his excitement, Ovid bangs his head on the door and falls down the stairs. The bedroom scene is preceded by a narratorial meditation on evil omens and misfortune, thus preparing us for the comic disaster to come (3085–112).

Ovid enters the bedchamber in joyful anticipation, but on getting into bed finds instead of Zeus's beautiful young mistress, Semele, a Berthe (3149)—probably an allusion to Charlemagne's mother, Big-footed Bertha. There then ensues a comic description of Ovid's wilting ardor and a harsh portrait of the old woman's body. The theme of transformation from beauty to ugliness is elaborated upon rhetorically by repeating the terms *muée* and *mutacions* (lines 3171, 3175, 3177), thus alluding wittily to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The description resembles other "before and after" portraits of women, for example that of Adam's wife in the comic play *Le Jeu de la feuillee*.³⁹ While Adam de la Halle describes the beauty perceived in his

³⁷ See D. M. Robathan, *The Pseudo-Ovidian De Vetula* (Amsterdam: A. M. Hakkert, 1968).

³⁸ *La Vieille ou les dernières amours d'Ovide: poème français du XIV^e siècle traduit du latin de Richard de Fournival par Jean Lefèvre publié pour la première fois et précédé de recherches sur l'auteur du vetula*, ed. Hippolyte Cocheris (Paris: Auguste Aubry, 1861).

³⁹ See Adam de la Halle, *Le Jeu de la feuillee*, ed. Jean Dufournet (Gand: Editions scientifiques, 1977),

wife by his protagonist when first married, then her ugliness once disillusionment had set in, Ovid stresses the discrepancy between the anticipated beauty of youth and the reality of the old woman's decrepit body. This otherwise conventional rhetorical portrait of elderly female ugliness participates in a long tradition which includes Matthew of Vendôme's *Ars versificatoria*,⁴⁰ Adam's *Jeu de la feuillee*, the *Roman de la Rose*, the *Lamentations of Matheolus* and Villon's "Regrets of the Belle Heaulmière" in his *Testament* (see below):

Le coul nerveux, la pointe ague
Des espauls la vielle argue,
Sa dure et paresceuse poitrine,
Sanz mammelles et sanz tetine,
Ses peaulx fronciés et soillées,
Vuides comme bourses moilliées.
Le ventre dur com terre crue
Arée au soc de la charrue,
Les reins seiches par leur maigresce,
Les cuisses caves par destresce,
Et les genoiz emfleiz et durs
Comme pierres dont l'en fait murs,
Vainquans ayment par rigour.
Tout ce me tollit ma vigour. (La Vieille, 3187–200)

[Her neck covered in veins, the sharp point of her shoulders betrayed the old woman, her hard, cowardly chest, without breasts or nipples, her wrinkled, stained pouches of skin, as empty as wet purses. Her belly as hard as raw earth ploughed by the ploughshare, haunches dry and skinny, thighs concave through suffering (undernourishment?), and knees swollen and hard as stones used for walls, defeating a lover's approach through their harshness. All this took away my potency.]

Particularly striking is the agricultural vocabulary and the emphasis on the sexual parts of the body which no longer, in the male narrator's eyes, serve their rightful purpose.

Ovid's response, apart from immediate impotence, is to want to kill the old woman, who would have been only too pleased to satisfy him (3225–26)—we note here the traditional view of old women as lascivious. However, death would release her too quickly from the sufferings of old age, so he decides to make the old witch (3250), as he calls her, live out her life in pain and poverty. As he imagines a just punishment for her, there ensues a description of what must have been a common experience for old women (especially spinsters) in the Middle

lines 81–174.

⁴⁰ See the portrait of Beroe quoted in Edmond Faral, *Les Arts poétiques du XII^e et du XIII^e siècle* (Paris: Champion, 1924), 130–32.

Ages: he hopes that she will spend her last days depending on alms and scraps of (often rotten) food, drinking vinegary wine, suffering from ailments such as bronchitis, arthritis, and the fever, and witnessing her bodily decay (the details here become quite repulsive, culminating in double incontinence, 3254–92).

Ovid's tragi-comic tale of love ends with his beloved marrying someone else. However, when her husband dies years later and she is free to marry the narrator, he finds himself ironically wooing a *vetula*. She is, in fact, only thirty-four, yet the narrator tells us that the ravages of childbirth can be read on her face: "on véoit par sa face / De ses enfantemens la trace" (3339–40). Echoing the advice of Philippe de Novarre, she claims that they are now free of fleshly desire, and sexual relations would not be appropriate for people of their age (3368–72). However, after lending her a sum of money, Ovid discovers that she is still attractive for her advanced age (3601–38) and does with her what he is capable of ("selon ma possibilité", 3834). He nevertheless regrets that the collusion between his mistress and the old woman delayed the consummation of their relationship to an age not so propitious for love-making.

The rest of the work in three books is about leisure activities and distractions more suitable for young men than courtship and love-making, and by book three, the narrator has rejected the vanities of love in favor of philosophy and religion.⁴¹ Despite the work's title, the cautionary tale of the old woman, though centrally placed, constitutes a rather small proportion of its overall length. It is immediately preceded, in Book 2, by a lengthy discussion of the sexual categorization of eunuchs and hermaphrodites, and their unsuitability for the priesthood. This juxtaposition thus suggests that male writers like pseudo-Ovid and Philippe de Novarre made a connection between anxieties over virility and the sexual demands of old women.⁴²

Apart from translating the *De vetula* into French in the late fourteenth century, Jean Le Fèvre also translated the antimatrimonial treatise *The Lamentations of Matheolus*. Both source texts were originally written in the thirteenth century in Latin and there was some cross-fertilization of themes and motifs between the originals, LeFèvre's translations, and also Jean de Meun's *Rose*.⁴³ In the *Lamentations de Matheolus*, LeFèvre includes some horror stories about *vieilles* in his comic attempts to prevent men from marrying. The husband/narrator (rather like Adam in the *Jeu de la feuillie*) claims that his wife has changed from a Rachel into

⁴¹ This tripartite structure is reminiscent of that adopted by Andreas Capellanus in his *De amore*, which in turn was no doubt inspired by Ovid's three books on love: the *Amores*, *Ars amatoria* and *Remedia amoris*.

⁴² A connection Christine de Pizan makes explicit in her *Epistre*, 336–40.

⁴³ See Karen Pratt, "Translating Misogamy: the Authority of the Intertext in the *Lamentationes Matheoluli* and its Middle French Translation by Jean LeFèvre," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 35 (1999): 421–35.

a Leah, and is now as cruel as Medea, the archetypal female deceiver and expert in magic.⁴⁴ His wife's portrait, following the usual rhetorical pattern, recalls that of the *vieille*:

Car orendroit est tant ripeuse,
Courbée, boque et tripeuse,
Desfigurée et contrefaite
Que ce semble estre une contrainte.
Rachel est Lya devenue,
Toute grise, tout chenue,
Rude, mal entendant et sourde,
En tous ses fais est vile et lourde;
Le pis a dur et les mamelles,
Qui tant souloient estre belles,
Sont froncies, noires, souillies
Com bourses de bergier mouillies.
Yeux a rouges, lerneus et caves.
Joes sans chair, maigres et haves. (*Lamentations*, I, 673–86)

[For now she is so mangy, bent, humpbacked, disfigured and misshapen that she looks like a monster. Rachel has become Leah, all grey and hoary, coarse, hard of hearing and deaf, heavy and uncouth in all her movements. Her breast is hard and her tits, which used to be so lovely, are wrinkled, black and stained like wet purses belonging to shepherds. She has red eyes, hollow and rhumy. Skinny, fleshless, sickly cheeks.]

The striking image of breasts like shepherds' purses is one which the Latin *Lamentationes* shares with the Latin *De vetula*, evidence not only for the thirteenth-century intertextuality mentioned above, but also for the citational nature of the discourse of misogyny.⁴⁵

LeFèvre's more detailed treatment of the vices of old women in Book II (1807ff) rehearses many of the prejudices inherited from his clerical forebears and his Latin source. Unsurprisingly, old women are always ready for sex, though surprisingly Abraham's Sarah is cited to support this view. What's more, he jokes, if an old woman were offered sex in her grave, her aged bones would begin to shake in anticipation: "Se la vieille estoit sur la fosse, / Qui de cogner li parleroit, / Ses vielz os remuer feroit." (II, 1816–18). The function, developed by Jean de Meun and later by Villon, of the old woman as sexual teacher to young girls, is mentioned by LeFèvre (II, 1831ff), although his warning that many a girl is deceived by procuresses working for the male lover reminds us of the role of the *entremetteuse* in the *fabliaux* and Latin comedies. Interesting in this context is the anecdote about an old woman who convinces a girl to accept her lover by pointing to her weeping

⁴⁴ See my earlier comments on Thessala in Chrétien's *Cligés*.

⁴⁵ See R. Howard Bloch, "Medieval Misogyny," *Representations* 20 (1987): 1–24, esp. p. 6.

dog whose tears had been produced by onions and mustard (II, 1856), a variant on the pepper and mustard of Dame Sirith. However, the fact that the heroine is called Galatea (II, 1858) indicates that LeFèvre's source has conflated elements of the *fabliaux* tradition with the Latin comedy *Panphilus*. What is more, the old woman is called a *renarde* (II, 1855) i.e., trickstress in the mould of Reynard the Fox, LeFèvre thereby adding to the complex web of literary tradition here. There is also intertextual dialogue, this time with Jean de Meun's *Rose*, when the *vieille* attempts by invoking arguments concerning the natural use of the sexual organs to persuade the girl to lose her virginity.⁴⁶ Warning Galatea not to be too proud, she advises ignoring the Church's unnatural teaching on chastity, for the clergy do not practice what they preach. The door of the belly, she states, was made for Priapus (II, 1904), and, echoing Ovid's Dipsas (*Amores*, I, 8, 86), she claims that God loves lovers and smiles at their misdemeanours (*Lamentations*, II, 1908–19). After this lecture the couple makes love, and the *vieille*, adopting another of her traditional roles as expert in contraception and abortion, prepares a hot bath and herbal remedies to make sure the girl does not conceive. At this point the male narrator curses such women and, to support his claim that old women cannot be trusted, he cites the case of Ovid (II, 1968), a clear reference to the protagonist of *De vetula*. All of these details are in the Latin source. This section ends with the narrator urging the old woman to mend her ways and telling her that she cannot recapture her youth, that she is growing uglier by the day and that her potions, make-up, and ointments will be of no avail. These admonitions recall the warnings of Phippe de Novarre to the elderly that the little time left to them should be used wisely to save their souls.

Although LeFèvre's translations date from the fourteenth century, their sources were contemporaneous with the thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*, which contains probably the most famous depiction of an old woman. Jean de Meun, the cleric who continued the romance begun by Guillaume de Lorris, was steeped in the Ovidian and pseudo-Ovidian traditions with which we are becoming familiar, but his treatment of the traditional figure contains some original features which will influence later authors, notably François Villon in the fifteenth century. Before discussing Jean's famous description of the *vieille* it is worth reminding ourselves of Guillaume de Lorris's treatment of old age in his section of the poem (339 ff). Old Age is the eighth of the anti-courtly vices depicted on the walls surrounding the garden of Deduit, or courtly pleasure. As an allegorical figure representing a feminine abstract noun, *vieillesce* is presented as a female, although some illuminators of *Rose* manuscripts paint a male figure at this point.⁴⁷ There are the

⁴⁶ The fullest discussion of the proper use of sexual organs is to be found in Genius's sermon in the *Rose*, II. 19505ff

⁴⁷ For example Princeton University Library, Garrett MS. 126, fol. 4r.

beginnings of a “before and after” rhetorical portrait here as Guillaume mentions the woman’s white hair, dried body and withered, lined face, which used to be soft and rounded (352–54).⁴⁸ Old age is clearly seen as a negative attribute, for it disqualifies one from courtly pursuits, including love-making, yet Guillaume portrays old age and the passage of time leading to it with some sympathy. There are references to senility as a second childhood (391–94), and realistic details such as the fact that the old feel the cold more keenly and need warm clothing (405–06). When, however, Guillaume introduces the *vieille* who is to guard Bel Accueil or Fair Welcoming in the tower built by Jealousy, he reverts to the stereotype of the experienced old woman who knows the tricks of the trade. Thus his narrator/lover, considering her to be the enemy, curses her (3920).

When Jean de Meun takes over the narrative from Guillaume he is faced with the traditional ambiguities inherent in the figure of the *vetula*. The male lover needs the help of the *vieille* as *entremetteuse* (go-between), yet her advice to her female ward will not necessarily be in his interests. This is the paradox that produces so much hatred in the male narrators of medieval texts: they are dependent on the powers of deception of the very characters who, they suspect, will betray them eventually.⁴⁹ The *vieille* is a major player in the battle of the sexes: no longer wielding the sexual power she had in her youth, but did not always fully exploit, she now uses the girl not only for financial gain, but to wreak revenge on the men who spurn old women (12878–82). Similarly, male writers allow their narrators to vent their spleen on the aged female, no doubt in revenge for all the times they have been rejected by or felt inadequate in the presence of women.

In the *Rose* the *vieille* first functions as a go-between. She is susceptible to flattery and gifts, and everyone despises her: Bel Accueil does not trust her (12560–65) and the narrator refers to her as “La pute vieille radotee” (12570; the rambling old whore). However, she does manage to persuade her ward to accept the gift of a garland of flowers from the Lover, and she does this by effectively employing a range of rhetorical strategies in her dialogue with Fair Welcoming. By characterizing this speech as a sermon on love (“preeschier”, 12739), Jean de Meun alludes ironically to the contemporary prohibition on women preaching.⁵⁰ In this

⁴⁸ Villon will reuse the motif of the “mossy” ears (355) in his description of the Belle Heaulmière, *Testament*, 514. See François Villon, *Oeuvres*, ed. Auguste Longnon, 4th edition rev. Lucien Foulet (Paris: Champion, 1969).

⁴⁹ This hatred and fear of deception are made very clear when the Lover/narrator interrupts the dialogue between the old woman and Bel Accueil to hurl abuse at “la fauce vielle serve” (12988; “the false old servant”).

⁵⁰ See *Woman Defamed and Women Defended*, 324, index entry on “preaching, women’s exclusion from” for references. The *Rose*’s *vieille*, like her analogue in Gautier d’Arras’s *Eracle*, is a teacher (note the key terms “ensaignier”, 12756; “endoctrine”, 12880; “sermon”, 12884, etc.), whose lesson is passed on from one generation of women to the next (13499–516).

fictional representation, however, the old woman is allowed to give the benefit of her worldly experience (12805) to her pupil, Bel Acueil, the aspect of the Beloved susceptible to the Lover's wooing.⁵¹ Echoing Isidore on the pros and cons of old age, the *vieille* argues that she has acquired the benefit of wisdom ("sage", 12761) in matters of love, yet her speech also offers glimpses of the travails of the elderly: she needs a stick to walk (12744–45), and now her body is failing and her beauty has faded (12764–67).

The *vieille* begins by regretting the ignorance of youth. Then she was able to seduce lots of men with her beauty, but was too naïve. At first she deceived them, but as her beauty faded they deceived her and now they all walk by and call her names (12827–56). Invoking the nostalgia-laden *ubi sunt* topos (where are they now?), she claims that all that remains are the memories of fleeting past pleasures (12862–67). Lamenting that she was born too soon (12870), she decides to teach Bel Acueil to be more worldly-wise and thus to avenge her against the *ribaudiaus* (debauched scoundrels) who scorn her (12882). Her advice can be summed up as follows:

1. the non-exclusivity of sexual relationships—nature did not institute monogamy, this was imposed by human laws;
2. how to win and keep a generous lover—here she warns against accepting poor poets (13617–20), perhaps a reference to Ovid the lover and recalling the words of Dipsas in the *Amores* (I, 8, 57–58);
3. the female arts of seduction—use of make-up, hair dye, wigs, how to dress well and cover up one's defects, hints on personal hygiene (13281–350);
4. how to keep lovers interested, by offering not too much or too little sex, by sometimes faking orgasm (14305–10), and by making the lover jealous;
5. she warns against believing in the power of magic and love potions and reminds us that Medea and Circe were unsuccessful in keeping their men (14395–408);
6. female lovers should not be too generous, but hang on to any money and gifts they are given (14409–40).

This cynical advice about how to seduce and fleece men will hopefully allow Bel Acueil to avoid the *vieille*'s own mistake, which was to fall in love with one man, to whom she gave all her money, even though he beat her (14459–539). So she offers herself to the young as a negative *exemplum* (14540), hoping that her "disciple" will avoid grinding poverty in old age. Returning to the Lover to

⁵¹ Perhaps we should note in passing that there is some gender confusion in this section, as Fair Welcoming, Bel Acueil, is gendered masculine, despite the fact that he represents the willingness of the lady to accept the advances of her suitor. It is possible that there is a homosexual sub-text here, as Simon Gaunt has argued, but for my purposes I shall refer to Bel Acueil as feminine, despite the fact that the *vieille* addresses her/him as 'Biau fis' (12555). Her advice seems, after all, to be designed primarily for young women. See Simon Gaunt, "Bel Acueil and the Improper Allegory of the Romance of the Rose," *New Medieval Literatures* 2 (1998): 65–93.

announce her success, she is promised as a reward warm clothing and boots, thus reinforcing her traditionally mercenary nature (14698–700). Yet although the male narrator/lover hates her cynicism and materialism, the *vieille* is presented by the author with some sympathy, and the audience (perhaps especially the women in it) might have empathized with her plight and perceived some value in her doctrine.

Ironically, she herself admits to the impossibility of guarding a healthy young woman (14381ff), and by the end of the romance, Bel Accueil succumbs to the lover. So the old woman fails as guard; whether she fails in her role as teacher, Jean de Meun does not reveal, for the work ends on the narrator “plucking the rose” in his erotic dream. As an example of masculine wish-fulfilment the dream narrative does not relate events after the consummation of the male’s desire, although lines 21657–67 seem to hint that once the woman has lost her virginity she will be free with her love. Interestingly, the final episode, which describes the lover as a pilgrim entering a narrow sanctuary, is accompanied by more observations on old women. Invoking Ovid’s remarks in *Ars amatoria*, II, 667–82, Jean contrasts making love with a young virgin with the pleasures afforded by more experienced women, who if rich will even provide financial perks for sexual encounters (*Rose*, 21435–538). Ironically though, in describing how experience rightly teaches older women to mistrust young lovers, he undermines much of the work’s misogynous emphasis on the deceptive nature of women. Here, it is the male suitor with his seductive language and behavior who is likened to the bird catcher (21491) who unfairly traps his innocent prey.⁵² The work thus ends on an ambiguous note, and it is left to the reader to decide whether or not old women are justified in their cynical attitude toward young men.

The *Roman de la Rose* was hugely influential throughout the later Middle Ages, and not least on the poetry of the fifteenth-century Parisian scholar and poet, François Villon. The main themes of his mock will, *Le Testament*, are transience and death, and there are several passages dealing with the plight of the old. Villon evokes movingly the situation of an old man on the brink of suicide who was popular and witty in his youth and is now treated like a disagreeable, stupid old monkey, whose plum tree no longer bears fruit (*Testament*, 424–44). He follows this with a consideration of the fate of indigent old women who have been robbed of their only source of income, their youthful beauty, and who, echoing Jean’s *vieille*, wish they had not been born so soon (450, cf. *Rose*, 12870). The narrator, adopting the stance of Ovid in the *Amores* (I, 8, 109) then overhears the regrets of the Belle Heaulmière (453ff), a helmet-maker and former prostitute, whose life-history is modelled on that of Jean’s *vieille*, for she too made the mistake of falling in love

⁵² Jean de Meun here inverts Dipsas’s claim in the *Amores* (I, 8, 69–70) that women trap men like birds.

and gave everything she earned to her abusive pimp (469–84). Despite the traditional nature of the “before and after” portrait which follows, with its graphic details of the female body in a state of decline,⁵³ the fact that the description is placed in the mouth of the woman and is punctuated by her laments and expressions of distress, makes it unusually pathetic in the real sense of the term.⁵⁴ However, true to her literary origins in the classical *lena* (procuress), the Heaulmière follows her regrets with a ballad on the *carpe diem* theme, encouraging the *filles de joie* who are her pupils to make hay while the sun shines and not to give away their favours for free. Like her literary predecessors, she is a teacher: “Ceste leçon icy leur baille / La belle et bonne de jadis” (561–62; Here this lesson is given to them by the woman who was once beautiful and good), but unlike Jean’s *vieille* she is not motivated by revenge, and the emotive and no doubt realistic portrait of impoverished old women huddled around a tiny fire (526–30) makes her mercenary advice understandable and almost palatable.

From this survey of the treatment of old age in French literature of the Middle Ages various conclusions can be drawn. First, it is shocking to see how little sympathy and respect are shown toward the old in many medieval French texts. However, since most of these works are the product of a courtly ‘youth and beauty’ culture, it is not surprising to see the elderly male and female often denigrated and mocked.⁵⁵ Similarly, epic texts value above all strength and prowess, qualities again associated with the young. Occasionally, the aged are appreciated for their wisdom, yet this quality is extolled more when it occurs in

⁵³ A new element here is the striking comparison of the old woman’s thighs with sausages (the scraggy, speckled French variety, not the plump, pink English ones!): “Cuisses ne sont plus, mais cuissetes / Grivelees comme saulcisses” (*Testament*, 523–24; They are no longer thighs but thighlets, mottled like sausages). For more remarks on this description, see Albrecht Classen’s “Introduction” to this volume, 32.

⁵⁴ The earliest medieval text to portray an old woman lamenting the passing of her youth is the Old Irish *Lament of the Old Woman of Beare*; see John Carey, “Transmutations of Immortality in the *Lament of the Old Woman of Beare*” *Celtica* 23 (1999): 30–37 for bibliography.

⁵⁵ It is from this courtly viewpoint that Aucassin, in the thirteenth-century *chante-fable* *Aucassin et Nicolette*, can claim that heaven holds few attractions for him as it is peopled by the poor, infirm and especially the old:

Il i vont ci viel prestre et cil viel clop et cil manke qui tote jor et tote nuit cropent devant ces autex
et en ces viés croutes, et cil a ces viés capes ereses et a ces viés tatereles vestues, qui sont nu et
decauc et estrumelé, qui moeurent de faim et de soi et de froit et de mesaises. Icil vont en paradis:
aveuc ciaux n’ai jou que faire.

[Those old priests and the aged lame go there and those who have only one arm and who crouch
night and day in front of those altars and in those old crypts, and those with old, worn-out cloaks
and wearing old rags, who are naked, bare-foot and bare-legged, who die of hunger, thirst, cold
and privation. Those people go to heaven and I want nothing to do with them.]

youth. Medieval audiences of Old French literature seem to have found little to sympathize with in accounts of geriatric suffering, which tended to be interpreted as punishment for sin.⁵⁶ However, elderly women were particularly vilified, and although these attacks were masked by a veneer of humor, such negative representation seems to reflect real masculine anxieties about female sexuality. Thus Ovid's old woman became a popular figure of fun within the discourse of misogyny, a wretched figure on whom many an aged cleric could wreak revenge for humiliations suffered at the hands of younger women. Paradoxically, though, the *vetula*, with her gift for outwitting husbands and lovers, could also represent for some readers, a positive image of female intellectual superiority. And the final irony, as modern critics have observed, is that the old woman can represent the clerical author himself, whose physical deficiencies are compensated by his intellectual strengths, and who shares with the *vieille*, the role of teacher and experienced dispenser of advice, whilst also being an expert in the art of verbal deception.⁵⁷

This may be one reason why we can detect an element of ambivalence in the treatment of the wily *entremetteuse* (go-between), the male poet sometimes betraying his admiration for the character whose wit enables her to triumph over the stupidity or greed of her adversaries. Nor should we forget that comic texts, although frequently antifeminist, present both genders as butts for their humor. For whilst castigating the deceptive wives of the *vieille*, they also show the defeated male protagonists in an amusingly dubious light. Moreover, the discourse of misogyny, although acquiring an impetus of its own through constant repetition, does not totally eclipse male writers' sympathy for the plight of the aged female, as we have seen in the case of Villon's "Belle Heaulmière" or in the same poet's beautiful ballad written in the voice of his elderly mother (*Testament*, 873–909). As always, though, we have to look to Christine de Pizan for an unambiguously positive depiction of an old woman. As Rosalind Brown-Grant argues, the elderly governess Sebile de la Tour is a positive rewriting of the *Rose's vieille*.⁵⁸ In both the *Livre des Trois vertus* (109–20) and the *Le Livre du duc des vrais amans*⁵⁹ Christine uses the older woman as an authoritative teacher, warning against the dangers of courtly love. Of course, in her advice to "ancianes femmes" (old women) in Book

⁵⁶ See the contribution to this volume by Rasma Laza, examining the ambivalent role assigned to Titirel in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and his *Titirel*.

⁵⁷ Rouhi, *Mediation*, 62, further argues that in antiquity the poet as teacher on love was in direct competition with the *lena*.

⁵⁸ See Rosalind Brown-Grant, *Christine de Pizan and the Moral Defence of Women: Reading Beyond Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 207–12; and Karen Pratt, "The Context of Christine's *Livre des trois vertus*: Exploiting and Rewriting Tradition," *Contexts and Continuities*, ed. Angus J. Kennedy et al. (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 2002), vol. 3, 671–84; here 680.

⁵⁹ See Albrecht Classen's Introduction to this volume, 22–24.

Three of the *Trois vertus* (197–200), she echoes the likes of Philippe de Novarre in warning aged females against bad temper, envy, drunkenness, and inappropriate behavior, whilst encouraging wisdom, discretion, and sympathy for the young. She, too, therefore presents both sides of the coin. Yet, unlike her male colleagues, Christine emphasizes the positive characteristics of the old woman when this traditional figure is represented in her own writing.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Indeed, for Christine de Pizan the elderly woman and her authoritative speech is an authorial persona.

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*Celestina: The Power of Old Age*¹

"Provide, Provide" — Robert Frost

The witch that came (the withered hag)
To wash the steps with pail and rag,
Was once the beauty, Abishag,

The picture pride of Hollywood.
Too many fall from great and good
For you to doubt the likelihood.

Die early and avoid the fate.
Or if predestined to die late,
Make up your mind to die in state.

Make the whole stock exchange your own!
If need be occupy a throne,
Where nobody can call *you* crone.

Some have relied on what they knew;
Others on being simply true.
What worked for them might work for you.

No memory of having starred
Atones for later disregard,
Or keeps the end from being hard.

¹ I would like to thank Karen Pratt, King's College, London, for a critical reading of my article.

Better to go down dignified
 What boughten friendship at your side
 Than none at all. Provide, provide!²

In a recent article, "Some Literary Portraits of the Old Women in Medieval and Early Modern Spain,"³ Joseph Snow summarizes the roles played by older women during the period of pre-Christian matriarchies. In such societies, such a person was afforded a special place of honor as wise and learned counselor while also representing a natural part of the eternal cycle of youth (birth), maturity (life), and age (death). With the advent of Christian society, Snow explains that the new paradigm of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, replaced not only the goddess figures of pre-Christian matriarchal cultures, but also transformed beliefs concerning young, mature, and old women as metaphors for the natural stages of birth, growth and death.⁴ In the Christian Trinitarian hierarchy, women were relegated to essentially two acceptable roles—the virgin and the mother—these two conveniently conflated in the figure of the Virgin Mary, forever beautiful and pure whose body never suffered the ravages of old age and death.

Furthermore, the introduction of Eve as the destroyer of the earthly paradise and the agent which brought death into the world, permanently displaced women, regardless of age, from any position of power.⁵ To quote Snow, "Death is now perceived as 'unnatural' and can be overcome and defeated in the ongoing battle between good and evil unleashed by this Woman, Eve, upon all her descendants With the advent of the Savior Son and his unblemished Mother, the essential

² Robert Frost, "Provide, Provide," *Literature and Aging: An Anthology*, ed. Martin Kohn, Carol Donley, and Delese Wear (Kent, OH, and London, England: The Kent State University Press, 1992), 38.

³ Joseph T. Snow, "Some Literary Portraits of the Old Woman in Medieval and Early Modern Spain," *"Entra mayo y sale abril": Medieval Spanish Literary and Folklore Studies in memory of Harriet Goldberg*, eds. Manuel Da costa Fontes and Joseph T. Snow (Newark, DE: Juan de la Cuesta-Hispanic Monographs, 2005), 349–63.

⁴ Although demographic data from early Christian and medieval times is very limited, Josiah Cox Russell's classic study, *Late Ancient and Medieval Populations*, in England during the middle of the thirteenth century, out of 1000 people born, an average of 350 reached age 40, 200 or so reached 50 and about 90 attained age 65 with a dozen living to be 80 or older (cited in Robert Magnan's article, "Sex and Senescence in Medieval Literature," *Aging in Literature*, ed. Laurel Porter and Laurence M. Porter. Studies in Language and Literature (Troy, MI: International Book Publishers, 1984), 13–30. Magnan also discusses such popular medieval tropes as the "Ages of Man" and the "Chain of Aging" but concludes that most often the stages of life were simply divided into two concepts: *juventus* and *senectus*.

⁵ The courtly love tradition somewhat attenuated the Christian Eve-Mary dichotomy as Magnan states: "This system of love promoted idolatry: women as sexual beings, all descendants of the temptress Eve, were elevated to the position of respect traditionally accorded to only the spiritual ideal, Mary; and in effect the source of Christian sin became the source of courtly salvation." Magnan, "Sex and Senescence in Medieval Literature," 18.

and positive role of the older woman in the matriarchal societies was not only diminished but eventually demonized."⁶ She was relegated to the margins of society and her wisdom became an object of fear. Her blighted youth became synonymous with ugliness and the signs of aging were believed to be physical manifestations of her sins and transgressions.⁷ She is associated with magic, both black and white, and her knowledge as traditional healer and midwife were ultimately appropriated by male practitioners.

Whereas the literary portraits of the old woman, often referred to as a Crone,⁸ existed in classical, pre-Christian literature, the figure reaches archetypal status in the literatures of Western Europe in the medieval and early-modern periods. While I will confine my analysis of this prototypical character to a work first published in 1499 in Spain, elements of her characterization and manipulation by authors can be applied to numerous other works.⁹ In this analysis, however, I hope to move beyond mere description of the stereotype to focus on a unique female character who, while embodying all aspects traditionally associated with the Old Crone, manages also to break out of her marginal status, to individualize herself, and to occupy the focal point and driving force behind the plot. This singular old woman is the bawd, procuress, healer, and enchanter known as Celestina.¹⁰

Although *Celestina* is not the original title for the bestselling work of fiction in sixteenth-century Spain now known by that title, soon after the publication of the *Tragicomedia de Calisto y Melibea*, editors and the publishers began to refer to the work by the name of its central and most colorful character. Celestina is an old bawd, a wise procuress, a madam, a repairer of lost maidenheads, and a bit of a sorceress. She dominates the text, interacting with people from all classes of

⁶ Snow, "Some Literary Portraits of the Old Woman in Medieval and Early Modern Spain," 352.

⁷ Snow, "Some Literary Portraits of the Old Woman in Medieval and Early Modern Spain," 353; see also Peter Dinzelbacher, "Heilige oder Hexen? Mystik als historisches Phänomen," *Hexenwelten. Mitteilungen aus dem Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg*. Neue Folge 31 (2001): 1–26.

⁸ See especially Barbara G. Walker's monograph, *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom, and Power* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985).

⁹ As representative of the Iberian canon, Snow cites numerous examples from the *cantigas d'escarnho* in Galician poetry, *El libro de buen amor*, *El Corbacho* of the Archpriest of Talavera, and *Celestina*. He admits that his examples are few and selective from the literatures of Spain and Portugal ("Some Literary Portraits," 361) One could also discuss from Iberia narrative poems from the thirteenth-century, such as the *Disputa del alma y el cuerpo*, didactic works including the *Proverbios morales* of Sem Tob, *El libro de los engaños*, *El conde Lucanor*, and *El libro de los enxemplos de a.b.c.*, collections of Marian miracles such as *Los Milagros de Nuestra Señora* and the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, etc.

¹⁰ The figure of Celestina is so engrained in Spanish collective memory that her name is synonymous with "alcahueta", procuress or go-between. (see the *Diccionario de la lengua española*. 21st ed. [Madrid: Real Academia Española, 1992], 452). See also Gretchen Mieszkowski's, *Medieval Go-Betweens and Chaucer's Pandarus* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), and Chapter 7 of Leyla Rouhi's *Mediation and Love: A Study of the Medieval Go-Between in Key Romance and Near-Eastern Texts*. Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, 93 (Leiden, Boston, and Cologne: Brill, 1999)

society who have need of her services at one time or another. The primary tool in her stockpile of skills is the power to use language to persuade, cajole, console, and, in the end, exploit her clients for her own monetary advantage. She is master rhetorician, and one of the favorite themes she employs is that of old age.¹¹ As an old woman, herself, Celestina uses her age to gain sympathy, garner respect, and establish her authority.

Here I would like to examine some examples of how Celestina exploits the theme of old age at key moments in the text.

The plot of the work known as *Celestina* is quite simple. A young nobleman, Calisto, falls madly in love with a young woman, Melibea, and, in order to win her affections, enlists the aid of the go-between, Celestina. Celestina successfully plays her part and masterminds secret meetings between the lovers in the garden of Melibea's house. After one night of clandestine lovemaking, Calisto, as he is attempting to leave, falls to his death from the high walls surrounding Melibea's garden. Melibea then commits suicide by throwing herself from a tower.

From the start, the servants of the lovers are instrumental in both the progress and frustrations of the affair between their master and mistress. In the course of the action, Calisto's two greedy servants murder Celestina when she refuses to share with them the rewards she has received from their master. The servants are summarily executed for their crime, but the two lovers, oblivious to all but seeking their own satisfaction, carry on their meetings until they also meet their death.

At first glance *Celestina* appears to be a simple tale of doomed lovers and their accomplices. But a closer reading reveals a sophisticated piece of literature which deals with the consequences of excessive self-interest, greed, and lust. The tragic fate of the young lovers, Calisto and Melibea, is not preordained. Their untimely end stems, not from ill-fated love, but rather from unbridled lust since both eagerly enter into a physical relationship without thought to the consequences either to themselves or others. The servants of Calisto are not anonymous lackeys but rather two very different individuals, and both are greedy and quick to take advantage of any opportunity to improve their lot. Celestina finds in Calisto a wealthy client who wants to maintain the guise of courtly lover even though his desire for Melibea is far from chaste. Calisto is essentially a selfish brat who is more than willing to pay Celestina to smooth the path which leads to his own carnal satisfaction. In her first meeting with Celestina, Melibea maintains the posture of offended virgin, initially refusing to acknowledge any interest

¹¹ Javier Herrero has studied Celestina as aging witch, but since the question of the extent or nature of Celestina's magical powers is not my focus, I have not directly used his ideas. For those who wish to consult his approach, the article "Celestina: The Aging Prostitute as Witch" appeared in the collection *Aging in Literature*, 31-47.

whatsoever in Calisto. However, Celestina soon dismantles her façade of chaste maiden and it is not long until Melibea is begging the go-between to find a way for her to be alone with Calisto. Melibea's parents refuse to acknowledge the reality of their daughter's sexual awakening and fail miserably in their traditional duties as guardians of familiar honor by allowing their daughter to associate with Celestina.

Celestina, for her part, is not the classic matchmaker but a richly nuanced character who is keenly aware of the role she plays in maintaining her society's façade of honor and who uses this power and knowledge to her own advantage. She is a master of the art of persuasion and possesses an uncanny gift for making people reveal, and act upon, what they most desire.¹² Celestina's arsenal of rhetorical skills is extensive and she is equally as likely to spout the teachings of Aristotle or Seneca¹³ as to resort to popular refrains. As I have already noted, she especially manipulates the oratorical possibilities of old age to her own advantage. She uses her advanced years as a tool to win sympathy, to cause people to lower their guard, and to remind them of her long and (illustrious) successful career. However, on a personal level, old age is difficult for Celestina; she admits to missing the pleasures of her youth and longs for the glory days when she was first among the city's prostitutes.¹⁴ Dorothy Severin identifies Celestina's *ubi sunt* speeches as part of her ability to spin the web of memory and, as such, she views herself as an "enemy of time."¹⁵ But, as an independent old woman, she has the freedom to roam without restraint throughout the city and wield the wisdom born

¹² Karen Pratt (see her contribution to this volume) discusses the somewhat contradictory nature of the Ovidian *vetula* in medieval literature but concludes that "in all cases . . . the old woman is clever and a mistress of deception: her main assets being her experience, verbal dexterity and sometimes her magic arts" (328).

¹³ On this point see especially Alan Deyermond's *The Petrarchan Sources of "La Celestina"* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961; Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975).

¹⁴ Speaking with Lucrecia, Melibea's servant, Celestina recounts her past glories: "Bien paresce que no me conociste en mi prosperidad, hoy ha veynte años. ¡Ay, quien me vido y quen me vee agora, no sé cómo no quiebra su coraçon de dolor! Yo vi, mi amor, a esta mesa dondo agora están tus primas assentadas, nueve moças de tus días, que la mayor no passava de deziocho años, y ninguna avía menor de quatroze." ("Ah, you didn't know me in my hey-day, some twenty years ago. Who saw me then and sees me now, I don't how his heart doesn't break from sadness! I saw, my dear, at this table where your cousins are now seated, nine girls about your ages, the oldest now more than eighteen and none younger than fourteen"). All citations from Fernado de Rojas, *La Celestina*, ed. Dorothy S. Severin. *Letras hispánicas*, 4 (Madrid: Cátedra, 1989), here 234.

¹⁵ Dorothy Sheman Severin, *Memory in 'La Celestina'*. Colección Tàmesis. Serie A: Monografías, 19 (London: Tamesis, 1970), 34.

of years of experience as she preys on the relative naivety of her clients and co-conspirators.¹⁶

Before the reader even encounters Celestina in the text, she is already a key component of the plot. When Sempronio, one of Calisto's servants, learns that his master is pining away for Melibea, he immediately suggests employing this old woman to help him to win her. Sempronio's first describes Celestina to Calisto using the phrase "una vieja barbuda" — an bearded old lady.¹⁷ While this term could simply be interpreted as a colorful way to say old crone, for sixteenth-century readers it carried a host of connotations.¹⁸ According to medical knowledge of the period an old lady with a beard was believed to have special propensity for lechery. The hair on Celestina's face is a symptom of unnatural menopause, associated with a woman who is still lusty at a time in life when she should not have such physical desires. In such a woman, the female humors are not purged from the body by normal means but rather escape through the pores of the face causing a beard to appear. Folkloric belief associated hair on a woman's face with uncommon virility. A woman with a manly appearance was also thought to be more intelligent than a more feminine-looking women since one of the traits popularly associated with outward signs of virility was superior intelligence.¹⁹ Celestina, the bearded old lady, certainly manifests all these medical and popular beliefs about her since lecherous desire is both the cause and means for her livelihood, and she has ample opportunity to display her keen intellect as she goes about her work extracting payments from the witless Calisto. It is worth noting, too, that the term "Barbuda" is applied three other times to Celestina in the course of the action, thus reminding the reader of these key aspects of her characterization.

Pármemo, Calisto's other servant, when he announces Celestina's arrival at Calisto's home for the first time, offers another telling description of her. Pármemo calls her "una puta vieja alcoholada," i.e., an old drunk whore.²⁰ His reference to

¹⁶ The only specific reference Celestina makes to her exact age is in the scene when she is trying to defend herself against the attack of Pármemo and Sempronio in Auto 12 when she calls herself "una vieja de sesenta años" (273) (an old women of 60 years). For an investigation of Celestina's true age, see Anne Eesley's article, "Celestina's Age: Is She Forty-Eight?" *Celestinesca* 10.2 (1986): 25–30.

¹⁷ Rojas, *La Celestina*, 103. All translations are my own.

¹⁸ For a thorough study of the term "vieja barbuda", see Jacobo Sanz Hermida, "'Una vieja barbuda que se dice Celestina': Notas acerca de la primera caracterización de Celestina," *Celestinesca* 18.1 (1994): 17–33.

¹⁹ On this point, see Karen Pratt's contribution to this volume: "The *vetula*, with her gift for outwitting husbands and lovers, could also represent for some readers, a positive image of female intellectual superiority" (13). **check later**; see also Gretchen Mieszkowski's article in this volume.

²⁰ Rojas, *La Celestina*, 108.

her as a whore beyond her prime is as equally blunt as it is accurate.²¹ He also seems to know that one of the few corporal pleasures left to Celestina in her old age is a fondness for drink.²² In contrast to the servants' unflattering descriptions of Celestina, i.e. as "vieja barbuda" and "puta vieja alcoholada," Calisto, desperate for the old woman's help, sees her in a much different light. When she enters his home for the first time he proclaims, in his usual manic style: "¡Mira[s] qué reverenda persona, qué acatamiento! Por la mayor parte, por la filosofía es conocida la virtud interior. ¡O vejez virtuosa, o virtud envejecida! ¡O gloriosa esperanza de mi deseado fin!"²³ ("Oh look at this most reverend person; certainly her outward appearance is a sign of her inner virtue. Oh virtuous old age, oh virtue grown old. Oh glorious hope for my desires"). For Calisto, Celestina's age is a sign of virtue, a sign of experience and reassurance, a far cry from the old hairy prostitute described by the servants. Calisto completely subverts the medieval topos of outward beauty as a sign denoting inner virtue. We know that Celestina is far from beautiful; years of hard living have had their effect and she bears a prominent scar across her cheek. But, for Calisto, she is a truly lovely sight since she represents his best chance for enjoying the pleasures of Melibea. The irony in Calisto's allusion to Celestina's virtue is obvious since her task will be precisely to lead Melibea away from the path of virtue and toward an illicit sexual rendezvous with Calisto.

Celestina knows full well how to exploit her age when she begins the task of arranging the love affair. For example, she first gains access to Melibea's house on the pretense of selling some thread, one of many such small transactions she claims she must resort to to support herself in her old age. She plays the role of pitiable and impoverished old woman to the hilt explaining to Melibea's maid that

²¹ On the accuracy of Pármeno's description and evaluation of Celestina, see Jesús G. Maestro, *El personaje nihilista: La Celestina y el teatro europeo* (Madrid: Iberoamericana; Frankfurt a. M.: Vervuert, 2001), 84–85.

²² Celestina speaks of her partiality to wine, its many virtues, and its warming effect on the old in the famous banquet scene in the ninth auto: "Poneos en orden cada uno cabe la suya; yo estoy sola porné cabe mí este jarro y taça, que no es más mi vida de quanto con ello hablo. Depués que me fui haziendo vieja no sé major officio a la mesa que escanciar, porque quien la miel trata siempre se le pega dello. Pues de noche en invierno no ay tal escalentador de cama; que con dos jarrillos destos que beva, quando me quiero acostar no siento frío en toda la noche" ("Everyone place themselves next to your loved one; and, since I'm alone, I'll place myself next to this jug and glass, because life is best when I'm speaking with it [wine]. Ever since I got old, my best service as table is pouring the wine, because whoever deals with honey is sure to get stuck in it. At night, in winter, there is no better bed warm and with two jugs like these I'm drinking, when I go to bed I don't feel any cold during the whole night"), Rojas, *La Celestina*, 224–25. Karen Pratt, in her contribution to this volume, also deals with old women's fondness for wine and other food delicacies (333–34).

²³ Rojas, *La Celestina*, 116.

she has come "como a las viejas nunca nos fallecen necesidades"²⁴ ("because the needs of old women never cease"). And later Celestina tells Melibea's mother that, because of her many misfortunes, she is in need of money and she has no other recourse than to sell a little thread that she had been saving to make wimples.²⁵ When Melibea's mother suddenly departs to attend a sick relative, she leaves the purchase of the thread in the hands of her daughter, thus providing Celestina with the perfect opportunity to speak privately with the young woman about the real motive for her visit.²⁶ And, just as she had with the mother, Celestina speaks to Melibea about the misfortunes that accompany her in her old age. In this way she not only hopes to win the young woman's sympathies but also to remind her of the fleeting nature of youth and the need to fully embrace life's pleasures while in one's prime. Celestina launches into a litany on the miseries of old age in contrast to the delights of youth: "Dios la dexe gozar su noble juventud y florida mocedad, que es [el] tiempo en que más placeres y mayores deleytes se alcançarán. Que a la fe, la vez no es sino mesón de enfermedades, posada de pensamientos, amiga de renzillas, congoxa continua, llaga incurable, manzilla de los passado, pena de lo presente, cuydado triste de lo porvenir, vezina de la muerte, choça sin rama que se llueve por cada parte, cayado de mimbre que con poca carga se doblega"²⁷ ("May God let you enjoy your noble youth and the springtime of your life, the time when more pleasures and greatest delights are found. For, by my oath, old age is nothing but a diet of illness, a resting place for worries, a friend of quarreling, continuous anguish, an incurable wound, a longing for the past, pain in the present, sad worries for the future, the neighbor of death, a shack without a roof where the rain pours in, a wicker cane that breaks under little weight"). Celestina continues in this vein for several more paragraphs, finally ending her list of lamentations with the crowning blow, that, if old age itself were not miserable enough, it is truly unbearable when one is also poor: "ay, ay senora! Si lo dicho viene acompañado de pobreza"²⁸ ("woe is me, lady . . . especially if all these afflictions are accompanied by poverty").

²⁴ Rojas, *La Celestina*, 151.

²⁵ "Con mis fortunas adversas otras, me sobrevino mengua de dinero; no supe mejor remedio que vender un poco hilado que para unas toquillas tenia allegado" ("Among my many misfortunes, I'm also short of Money; I knew no better solution than to sell a little thread that I had saved to make wimples."), Rojas, *La Celestina*, 153.

²⁶ For a summary of the critical debate surrounding the sudden departure of Melibea's mother at this key moment in the plot, see Maestro, *El personaje nihilista*, 87–88.

²⁷ Rojas, *La Celestina*, 154.

²⁸ Rojas, *La Celestina*, 155. Recounting the ravages of old age was a popular motif in medieval literature borrowed from classical rhetorical tradition. See for example the elegies attributed to Maximianus, *De Miseria* of Innocent II, and Antonio Pucci's "Canzone della Vecchiezza." Similar litanies can also be found in the fourteenth century in various poems by Eustache Deschamps (ca. 1346–ca. 1460) (for the references, see Magnan, "Sex and Senescence in Medieval Literature," 23).

When Melibea realizes that she knows Celestina from the time when they used to live in the same neighborhood, she remarks that the woman has aged significantly since the last time she saw her. Celestina immediately picks up on this observation to reiterate how time has ravaged her and her fortunes and how her present situation stands in stark contrast to the youth and vitality enjoyed by Melibea. She tells Melibea: "¿No has leydo que dizen: Verná el día que en el espejo no te conoscias? Pero también yo encanecí temprano, y paresco de doblada edad. Que así goze desta alma pecadora y tú desse cuerpo gracioso . . ." ²⁹ ("Haven't you read what they say? There will come a day when you don't recognize yourself in the mirror? But, the truth is, my hair turned grey very early and I appear twice my age. But such is the fate of this old sinner while yours is to enjoy your attractive body"). Celestina ultimately persuades Melibea to have mercy on the suffering Calisto while she is young and in the full flower of her beauty. In her rhetorical maneuvering with the young woman, Celestina successfully exploits her own old age and its accompanying sorrows to incite Melibea to delight in physical pleasures now before time robs her of such opportunities. ³⁰

Celestina also uses her age to her advantage in a conversation with Pármeno, the younger of Calisto's two servants. Pármeno, at first, had been reluctant to help Celestina in her efforts to arrange Calisto's affair with Melibea. Celestina wins him to her cause by reminding him that even though he was too young to remember, they, in fact had a prior relationship. Celestina had been best friends with Pármeno's mother when they were both young and she tells him that her death had been just as tremendous a loss for her as it had been for Pármeno. Even though Pármeno does admit to remembering Celestina, albeit none too fondly, he doesn't feel any particular obligation to help her on account of her relationship with his deceased mother. ³¹ But Celestina is not dissuaded in her attempt to enlist Pármeno to cooperate wholeheartedly in her scheme to win Melibea. Celestina tells him that she is prepared to forgive him for having spoken ill of her to his master. She attributes his behavior to his youth and inexperience: ". . . mira que soy vieja y el buen consejo mora en los viejos y de los mançebos es proprio el deleyte. Bien creo que de tu yerro sola la edad tiene culpa" ³² (" . . . look I'm old and good advice dwells in the old just like delight does in young people. I truly believe that your youth is to blame for your error"). She further tells him that he is like all

²⁹ Rojas, *La Celestina*, 158.

³⁰ For a treatment of the subject of youth as the proper time (i.e., established by nature) for love, see J. A. Burrow's *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), especially 156–57.

³¹ In the end, Celestina brings up the memory of Pármeno's mother one two many times, causing the young man to lose control and kill the *alcahueta*. On this topic, see Severin's *Memory in "La Celestina"* (London: Tamesis Book Limited, 1970), 20–25.

³² Rojas, *La Celestina*, 192–93.

young people, selfish and unconcerned about his elders: “Pero los moços curáys poco de los viejos; regísvos a sabor de paladar; nunca pensáys que tenéys ni havéys de tener necesidad dellos; nunca pensays en enfermedades; nunca pensáys que os puede esta florezilla de juventud faltar”³³ (“But young people are not concerned about the elderly, for you it is all about savoring the moment, never thinking that you have, or may ever have, need for old people. You never think about illness or consider that the flower of youth will fade”). Since Pármeno was not persuaded by nostalgic accounts of his childhood, Celestina turns to a different tactic with him. She promises to deliver him into the arms of Areúsa, a young prostitute whom Pármeno has had his eye on for some time. Since her first plan had failed, Celestina resorts to a sure-fire appeal to the raging hormones of the young servant to secure his cooperation.

Celestina quite literally arranges to introduce Pármeno into Areúsa’s bed. When she and Pármeno arrive at the young woman’s home, Areúsa is preparing for bed. Celestina at first goes in alone and Areúsa tells the go-between that she is going to bed early because she is suffering horribly from the *mal de madre*.³⁴ Of course, Celestina immediately proposes that the best cure for this female complaint is a vigorous night of love making and she has just the fellow in mind for the task; in fact, he is waiting right outside the door. Celestina begins to fondle the young woman who is lying nude in her bed; she remarks on Areúsa’s plump and inviting body and, with both verbal and physical foreplay, prepares her for the sudden entrance of Pármeno on the scene. The lesbian nature of Celestina’s seduction of Areúsa has not gone unnoticed by critics.

Dangler, for example, sees Celestina as “monstrous, masculine seducer of women” whose meetings with other women are “duplicitous because they occur not for healing purposes, but for the *medianera*’s own enjoyment.” This critic also points out that, in this scene, “Celestina wishes she were a man in order to seduce and take pleasure in the young woman”³⁵: “¡O quién fuera hombre y tanta parte alcançara de ti para gozar tal vista! (“Oh, wouldn’t it be great to be a man and be able to fully enjoy such a sight”). Mary Gossy on the point of Celestina’s lesbian desire asserts that “She [Celestina] is indifferent to the boundaries set up to control

³³ Rojas, *La Celestina*, 193.

³⁴ “Mal de madre” may be translated as either “wandering womb” or “suffocation of the womb.” On this illness, as well as recommended cure of sexual activity, see Jean Dangler’s “Transgendered Sex and Healing in *Celestina*,” *Celestinesca* 25.1–2 (2001): 69–81. See also Dangler’s *Making Difference in Early Modern Iberia* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), for a general discussion of beliefs about the medieval benefits of coition, especially 89–93.

³⁵ Dangler, Jean. *Making Difference*, 116. Dangler further states that Celestina, in her meeting with Areúsa in Act Seven, blurs the line between her intention to heal the young woman and her erotic desire.

and mark her, whether they be architectural, social, or sexual.”³⁶ When the go-between has the young man successfully installed in Areúsa’s bed, she decides to stay awhile with them and play the voyeuse. Areúsa at first objects to her presence in the room, but Celestina again has recourse to her old age and experience in affairs of the heart to justify her voyeuristic desires. She upbraids Areúsa saying: “Parece, hija, que no sé yo qué cosa es esto, que nunca vi estar un hombre con una mujer, juntos, y que jamás passé por ello ni gozé de lo que gozas, y que no sé lo que pasan y lo que dicen y hazen . . . parece que ayer nascí según tu encobrimiento; por hazerte a ti honesta me hazes a mí necia y vergonçosa . . .”³⁷ (“Daughter, do you think I don’t know about this, that I have never seen a man be with a woman, that I never experienced it myself, that I never enjoyed what you are enjoying, that I don’t know what happens, what they say and do? By your show of bashfulness you would think I was born yesterday; you’re just trying to make yourself appear modest while you make me appear foolish and disgraceful”). Areúsa begs Celestina’s pardon and tells her that she may stay but, Celestina, now angry and even a bit jealous, storms out of Areúsa’s bedroom, leaving the two young people to take their pleasure in private. As she is leaving, she shouts: “Quedaos a Dios, que voyme solo porque me hazes dentera con vuestro besar y retoçar, que aún el sabor en las enzías me quedó; que no le perdí con las muelas”³⁸ (“May God be with you; I’m leaving you alone because you set my teeth on edge with all your kissing and frolicking; the taste of it is still on my gums; I didn’t lose it with my teeth”). In other words, she would rather not be witness to the young peoples’ love making since it brings back too many fond memories of the pleasures that she herself is now too old to enjoy.³⁹ When Pármeno gallantly offers to leave Areúsa’s bed and accompany Celestina to her home, she spits out: “. . . acompañeos Dios, que yo vieja soy; no he temor que me fueren en la calle”⁴⁰ (“let God accompany you because I’m a old woman and I have no fear that anyone will rape me on the street”).

³⁶ *The Untold Story: Women and Theory in Golden Age Texts* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 41. Also, on Celestina’s homosexual desire, see Linde M. Brocato, “‘Tened por espejo su fin’: Mapping Gender and Sex in Fifteenth-Century Spain,” *Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossing from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, ed. Josiash Blackmore and Gregory S. Hutcheson (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 325–65; here 343.

³⁷ Rojas, *La Celestina*, 208.

³⁸ Rojas, *La Celestina*, 208.

³⁹ Magnan states regarding medieval beliefs about the relationship between age and sexual activity: “If love is natural and right for *juventus*, it is necessarily unnatural and wrong for *senectus*.” (Magnan, “Sex and Senescence in Medieval Literature,” 19). Celestina seems to accept that sexual activity is not an option at her age, but she also reveals that she still feels such desires. On this point, see also Karen Pratt in her contribution to this volume and Brocato, “‘Tened por espejo su fin,’” 343.

⁴⁰ Rojas, *La Celestina*, 209.

But Celestina does have self-doubts and worries related to her age. For example, on her way to visit Melibea for the first time, she has a long soliloquy about her fear of punishment if the true nature of her visits to the young woman is revealed. She also worries about her reputation: What will Calisto think of her if she fails in her mission? Is she too old to perform as well as she once did? Speculating about what Calisto may say if she is not successful in winning over Melibea, she imagines him calling her "puta vieja" ("old whore") and "vieja traydor"⁴¹ ("old traitor"). But she gives herself a pep talk, becomes more animated, and determines to go through with her mission. She tells herself that, when she left home this morning, all the omens were favorable. And, she hasn't stumbled on the way, as she has begun to do of late. On this day, "nunca he tropezado como otras vezes. Las piedras parece que se apartan y me hazen lugar que passe; ni me estorvan las haldas, ni siento cansación en andar . . ." ⁴² ("I didn't stumble as on other occasions. The stones seem to jump out of my way and let me pass, nor did I get tangled up in my skirts and I don't feel tired walking").

These comments imply that, on other occasions, the old woman has felt her age, that her step was uncertain, and that falling was a very real worry. In her private musings, Celestina is much less confident than in the "roles" she plays, especially in the company of Calisto.⁴³

Celestina plays the old age card one last time when Pármeno and Sempronio come to her house to demand a share in the gifts she has received from their master, Calisto. She scolds them and reminds them that they are new-comers to this game. She is a venerable old woman who should be respected both for her years and her experience. She tells Sempronio, ". . . no amengües mis canas, que soy una vieja qual Dios me hizo, no peor que todas"⁴⁴ ("don't threaten my grey hairs, I'm just an old woman as God made me, no worse or better than any other"). She bravely tells them that they have no claim on the salary paid her by Calisto and that they should leave her home at once. But, unfortunately, this time her persuasive powers fail her. Pármeno and Sempronio stab her to death when she refuses to give up any part of her earnings. In this scene, Sempronio turns to Pármeno and reminds him that "No es esta la primera vez que yo he dicho quanto en los viejos reyna este vicio de cobdicia . . ." ⁴⁵ ("It is not the first time that I have

⁴¹ Rojas, *La Celestina*, 150.

⁴² Rojas, *La Celestina*, 150.

⁴³ On the subject of Celestina's sin of pride and tragic error, see Jesús G. Maestro, *El personaje nihilista*.

⁴⁴ Rojas, *La Celestina*, 273.

⁴⁵ Rojas, *La Celestina*, 271-72.

told you how much the vice of greed reigns supreme among the old").⁴⁶ Of course, Sempronio and Pármene, although much younger than Celestina, are just as greedy as she is. In *Celestina* greed is universal and, despite Sempronio's declaration, it is not a vice reserved for the old.

In these few examples we have seen how Celestina uses her advanced years as an asset as she exercises her powers of persuasion. She makes repeated reference to her years of experience, her long list of satisfied customers, and the singular reputation she has built up over time. It is indeed ironic that the one time she is unsuccessful in commandeering old age to her advantage is when she is threatened with death. Her inordinate greed and faith in her own infallibility eventually fail her. It is also ironic that, despite her many complaints about the miseries accompanying old age, neither illness nor frailty proves to be her ultimate downfall. She simply goes to the rhetorical well of old age one too many times, finally coming up empty.

As we have observed, *Celestina* presents one of the most nuanced and powerful portraits of the old woman in the Spanish literary corpus. Celestina's many skills, including her powers of persuasion, her great success as a go-between, her art of "remaking virgins" place her clearly within the medieval context of the old woman/healer/procuress. But she is much more—a literary figure who "lives" on in the plot even after her murder. Mary Gossy asserts that "Celestina is murdered not only because she is greedy for gold, but because she is a witchy woman—she does not accept Sempronio and Pármene's restrictions upon her movement any more than she accepts the lovers' assumption that the garden wall between Melibea and Calisto is insurmountable, or that age should deprive her of whatever sexual enjoyment she can sense, or that because Areúsa is a woman she may not revel in the sight and feel of her."⁴⁷ Celestina is subversive on many levels (social, religious, sexual), and she presents a truly compelling portrait of how a literary figure can use old age as both a shield and a weapon in the struggle to remain a vital member of the cast.

To offer an illustration how later artists have interpreted this highly intriguing, ambiguous, self-assured, yet insecure figure, I reproduce Pablo Picasso's famous painting *Celestina*.

⁴⁶ On greed and love of money in the old, see Burrow's citation of Aristotle in *Rhetoric*, Book II: "they are not generous, because money is one of the things they must have, and at the same time their experience has taught them how hard it is to get and how easy to lose" (*The Ages of Man*, 193). See also the contribution to this volume by Harry Peters.

⁴⁷ *The Untold Story*, 40–41.

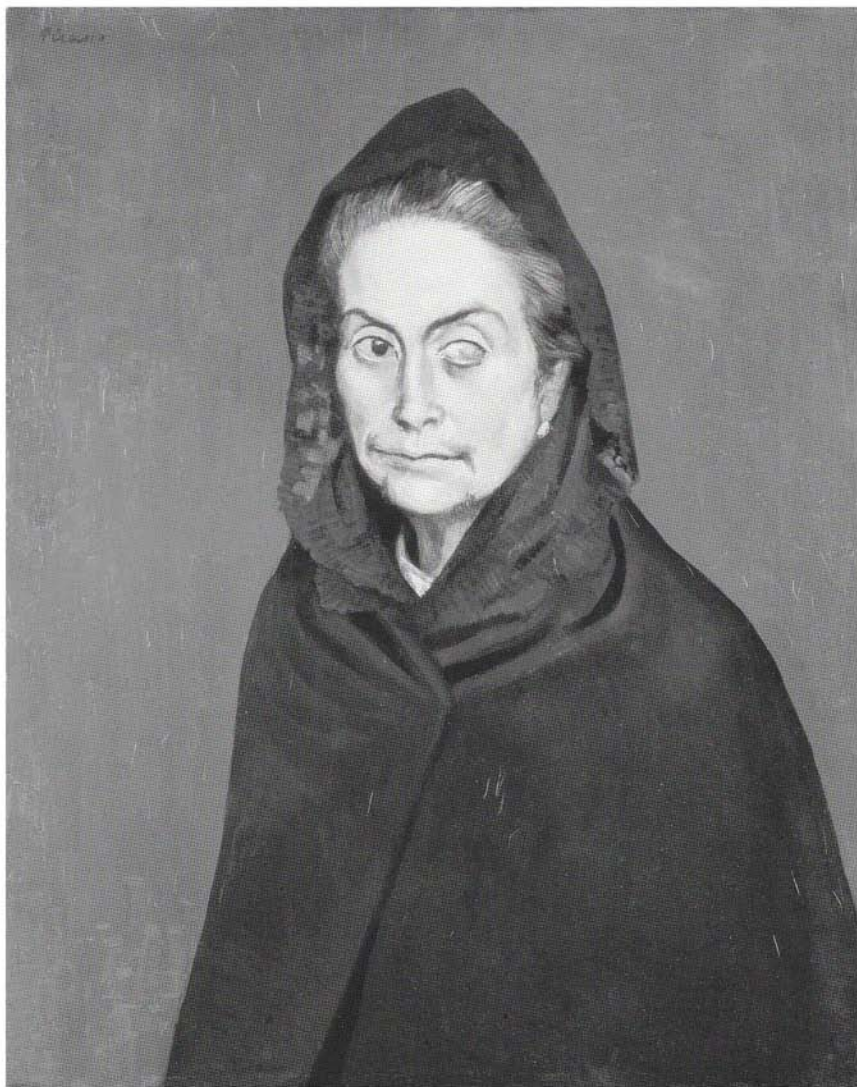


Fig. 1: Pablo Picasso: *Celestina* (1904)

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Forty Years of Plague: Attitudes toward Old Age in the Tales of Boccaccio and Chaucer

The two sets of stories written in the fourteenth century by Boccaccio and Chaucer offer insight into their cultures' views of old age through the attitudes displayed by young people toward the elderly. Even though their stories often display similar attitudes toward other aspects of medieval society, Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* differ significantly in the treatment of old people. Between the years when these two works were written, the characteristics of European demographics changed radically as a result of the Black Plague, and the strikingly altered percentages of young and old people in the population may have affected people's attitudes toward age. In "The Plague in Literature and Myth," René Girard explains the ethical effects of plague on a population in general, arguing that just as plague levels social and economic differences by killing indiscriminately, it also undermines the foundations on which earlier values and beliefs have been based.¹ Joseph Falvo, writing specifically about the 1348 Black Plague, sees the extent of reappraisal and transformation of the basic social structures and values resulting from this plague as "a shift in semiotic history."² It is not surprising, therefore, that attitudes toward old age, which are socially constructed values, would shift during the second half of the fourteenth century.

Although the stories in the *Decameron* are told by a group of young people enjoying their first tastes of freedom from the moral constraints usually imposed on them by an older generation, Boccaccio's tales tend to uphold the earlier conventional view of the elderly as sources of wisdom. Boccaccio's famous 1348 description of the social disintegration in Florence caused by the Black Plague laments the sudden absence of older authority figures: It states, for example, that "per li ministri ed esecutori di quelle, li quali, sì come gli altri uomini, erano tutti

¹ René Girard, "The Plague in Literature and Myth," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 15 (1973-74): 833-50; here 833.

² Joseph Falvo, "Ritual and Ceremony in Boccaccio's 'Decameron,'" *Modern Language Notes* 114 (Jan. 1999): 143-56; here 144.

o morti o infermi o sì di famigli rimasi stremi, che ufficio alcuno non potean fare” (“like everybody else, those ministers and executors of the laws who were not either dead or ill were left with so few subordinates that they were unable to discharge any of their duties”).³ Furthermore, older family members are no longer there for their children: “e, che maggior cosa è e quasi non credibile, li padri e le madri i figliuoli, quasi loro non fossero, di visitare e di servire schifavano” (19; “Even worse, and almost incredible, was the fact that fathers and mothers refused to nurse and assist their own children, as though they did not belong to them;” 54). Pampinea, the young woman who first proposes that the group of young people escape from Florence, justifies their leaving the city by reminding the others that “anzi ne possiamo con verità dire molto più tosto abbandonate; pe ciò che i nostril, o morendo o da morte fuggendo, quasi non fossimo loro, sole in tanta afflizione n’ hanno lasciate” (34; “we may fairly claim that we are the ones who have been abandoned, for our kinsfolk are either dead or fled, and have left us to fend for ourselves in the midst of all this affliction, as though disowning us completely;” 61).⁴

This plague Boccaccio and his characters describe hit the elderly portion of the population the hardest. In his study of late medieval population demographics, J. S. Russell states that of the 20% of the population who died across most of Europe during the two years 1348–1350, the largest proportion were older men.⁵ In *King Death: the Black Death and its Aftermath in Late Medieval England*, Colin Platt points to one study done using the Walsham-le-Willows data collected by Lock that claims 90 per cent of the elderly died there in 1349 while only 14% of those in their twenties died and 20% of those in their thirties.⁶ Although the numbers in this study might not represent those for all areas of Europe, they do indicate that in some areas the death rate for the elderly was horribly high.

At the time that Boccaccio is writing, then, young people would have watched the older generation die off almost over night; the older, wiser figures who traditionally offer sage advice and maintain social, religious, and moral order were

³ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, a cura di Vittore Branca. Nuova edizione con xilografie tratte dalla prima stampa illustrate (1492) (Firenze: Felice le Monnier, 1965), 17–18; for the English translation, see: *The Decameron*, trans. G. H. McWilliam (New York: Penguin Books, 1972), 53.

⁴ Marilyn Migiel, *A Rhetoric of the Decameron* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 164: “Throughout, I read the storytelling of the *Decameron* as an ongoing ambitious project in the construction of social reality, impressive for its wide-ranging scope, for its engaging and jocular treatment of the weighty issues that touch the lives of women and men, . . .,” to which we could simply add: issues that concern old age.

⁵ J[osiah] S. Russell, “Late Medieval Population Patterns,” *Speculum* 20 (1945): 157–71; here 166–67.

⁶ Colin Platt, *King Death: the Black Death and its Aftermath in Late Medieval England* (London: University College London Press, 1966), 10. See also Joseph P. Byrne, *The Black Death* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004) and *Pest: Die Geschichte eines Menschheitstraumas*, ed. Mischa Meier (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2005).

suddenly gone. Although Pier Massemo Forni calls the *Decameron* a fantasy of parricide in which the freedom from patriarchal tyranny underlies the framework of the tales, these young people display much ambivalence toward their freedom.⁷ Instead of simply celebrating their independence, Boccaccio's young people actually tell a number of the tales that suggest nostalgia, I argue, for this older generation that was hit especially hard during the initial wave of the plague.

The first tale told in the *Decameron*, Panfilo's story about Ser Cepperello or Saint Ciappelletto, underscores young people's ambivalent views toward the elderly as our first story teller, Panfilo, incredulously describes the way an old, wicked man has duped people into thinking he is worthy of being a saint. Two young men watch the corrupt old man lie to a friar on his death bed and wonder: "Che uomo è costui, il quale né vecchiezza né infermità né paura di morte alla qual si vede vicino . . . , né far ch'egli così non voglia morire come egli è vivuto?" (63; "What manner of man is this, whom neither old age nor illness, nor fear of the death which he sees so close at hand . . . [can] persuade him to die any differently from the way he has lived?" 79).

They, however, choose not to tell the friar the truth about the old man's lies because it suits their purposes for him to be buried quickly with no questions asked. As a result of their silence, the friar is made to look foolish, an evil old man is declared a saint, and many miracles are attributed to him. Our young narrator, Panfilo, is puzzled and cannot understand the implications of his tale. How can an evil old man bring about miracles? He finally concludes that perhaps God forgave Ser Ciappelletto at the eleventh hour though the truth of the situation, he says, will always remain unknown. The ten days of story telling, therefore, start out with young people questioning the actions and merits of the older generation, but reaching no satisfying conclusions.

Another early tale that continues this sense of ambivalence toward older characters is Fiammetta's story on the Fourth Day about Tancred, the Prince of Salerno, said to have been a most benevolent ruler until "nella sua vecchiezza non s'avesse le mani bruttate" (462; "in his old age he sullied his hands with the blood of passion;" 332). After he imprisons her lover, his daughter reminds him that he had never acted cruelly before his "estrema vecchiezza" (472; "extreme old age;" 339) and appeals to him to remember from his own earlier years the nature and power of the laws of youth (472; 337). If Tancred had not cried and made repentance after the lovers' deaths, Fiammetta's story would have ended with a bitter portrayal of a cruel old man. Instead, the ending focuses on Tancred's grief as he honors the memory of the young lovers. Fiammetta and the other young

⁷ Pier Massemo Forni, "Therapy and Prophylaxis in Boccaccio's *Decameron*," *Romance Quarterly* 52.2 (2005): 159–62; here 161.

people look toward the elderly for assurances that the ideals they had been taught still exist.

Boccaccio himself, as author, brings up the topic of age and desire in the Introduction to Day Four when he tells an exemplum meant to explain and excuse his own interest in young women.⁸ In the short tale we are told that despite a widowed hermit's efforts over eighteen years to protect his son from the attractions of the outside world, "Filippo vecchio" (453; in "ripe old age;" 327) cannot prevent his son from being immediately attracted to the first beautiful woman he ever sees. Through this exemplum, Boccaccio claims, with tongue in cheek, that it is natural for him himself, as well as for this young man, to admire the beauty and desire the love of women even when wisdom coming from age warns against these desires. Most commentators on this short narrative, such as David Wallace, focus on Filippo's rejection of the natural cycles of life, which include the death of a spouse and sexual energy in young men.⁹ Boccaccio himself wants to align himself with the young man even though he is much older:

E quegli che contro alla mia età parlando vanno, mostra mal che conoscano che, perché il porro abbia il capo bianco, che la coda sia verde: a' quali, lasciando stare il motteggiare dall'un de' lati, rispondo che io mai a me vergogna non reputerò infino nello estremo della mia vita di dover compiacere a quelle cose alle quali Guido Cavalcanti e Dante Alighieri già vecchi, e messer Cino da Pistoia vecchissimo onor si tennono, e fu lor caro il piacer loro (456–57).

[As for those who keep harping on about my age, they are clearly unaware of the fact that although the leek's head is white, it has a green tail. But joking apart, all I would say to them is that even if I live to be a hundred, I shall never feel any compunction in striving to please the ones who were so greatly honoured, and whose beauty was so much admired, by Guido Cavalcanti and Dante Alighieri in their old age, and by Cino da Pistoia in his dotage; 329].

Although he tries in this passage to justify old men's continuing interest in and desire for young women, the stories that the young people tell ironically undercut his statements about love. Immediately after this introduction to the Fourth Day, the stories that follow, such as Fiametta's on Tancred's daughter, all recount bitter disappointment in love. Thus, old Filippo's wise warnings in the exemplum about the pain caused by love prove apt. Moreover, the stories the young characters tell

⁸ Scholars who discuss Boccaccio's introduction to Day Four focus on his justification for writing love stories for women and on his use of the vernacular to do so. See, for instance, Stavros Deligiorgis, *Narrative Intellection in the Decameron* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1975), 78–81. Also, David Wallace, *Giovanni Boccaccio Decameron*. Landmarks of World Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 48–52; and Glending Olson, "Petrarch's View of the *Decameron*" *Modern Language Notes* 91 (1976): 69–79.

⁹ Wallace, *Giovanni Boccaccio Decameron*, 51.

also show that they expect older people like Boccaccio to temper their physical desires. Older men who initially lust after younger women are shown to restrain themselves in later stories told by these young narrators. Two tales about old men on Day Ten, the final day of storytelling, recount how King Charles the Old in Tale Six and King Peter in Tale Seven wisely reject the temptation to join in physical unions with beautiful young women after thinking things through. Therefore, despite Boccaccio's attempt to justify older men's interests in young women, older men who control their physical desires are treated with respect by the younger generation of story tellers.

In many of the other tales in the *Decameron*, the conflict between the desires of young lovers and their parents' plans for them ends with an endorsement of a parent's advice. The stories turn out well because a parent knows how to resolve the serious problems the young people have gotten themselves into. Lauretta's story on Day Five, for example, tells how after Violante bears an illegitimate child, her father threatens to hang her lover and to force her to kill herself. This parent's plan, however, is supplanted by a better resolution made by another parent, the young man's father, who suggests the two young people marry. After seeing the dangerous consequences of her own earlier decisions, Violante is ready to listen to her father by the end of the tale. She says that marrying her lover would make her happy, "ma tuttavia farebbe quello che il padre le comandasse" (656; "but at all events she would do whatever her father ordered;" 456). In Boccaccio's version of the corrupt magistrate story retold by many writers (Tale Six on Day Four, told by Panfilo) the wise father not only rescues his daughter from the corrupt magistrate who tries to rape her, but also lets her choose whether to marry the magistrate or to enter a nunnery. Since the daughter is taken before the chief magistrate in the first place because the man she has secretly married dies, Panfilo's young woman, as had Lauretta's, depends on her father to extract her from the dangerous situation in which she had gotten herself.

In another story on Day Five, the young man Filostrato tells the fourth tale about a young woman who sleeps on her family's balcony so that her suitor, Ricciardo Manardi, can climb up to spend the evening with her. Her old father, though short-tempered "per ciò che vecchio era e da questo forse un poco ritroso" (621; "perhaps because of his age, was inclined to be short-tempered;" 433), forces the rich young man to marry his daughter after they are discovered sleeping in each other's arms and, thus, resolves the conflict. The storyteller, Filostrato, who is himself a young man whose "li cui amori ebbero infelice fine" (441; "love [for one of the young female storytellers] ended unhappily" has the old father explain to the young man that his youth is what led him into error; 320). Filostrato also goes on to say that the young man is eager, in fact, to do what the old man tells him to do:

Ma a ciò non furono troppi prieghi bisogno: per ciò che d'una parte la vergogna del fallo commesso e la voglia dello emendare, e d'altra la paura del morire e il disiderio dello scampare, e oltre a questo l'ardente amore e l'appetito del possedere la cosa amata, liberamente e senza alcuno indugio gli fecer dire sé essere apparecchiato a far ciò che a messer Lizio piaceva. (436)

[All this pleading [the girl's] was quite superfluous, however, for what with the shame of his transgression and his urge to atone on the one hand, and his desire to escape with his life on the other (to say nothing of his yearning to possess the object of his ardent love), Ricciardo readily consented, without a moment's hesitation, to what Messer Lizio was asking (436)].

Since Filostrato is himself a young man with interests similar to those of the young man in his story, his expressions of respect for the old man are especially meaningful. Boccaccio first presents him to us as somewhat rebellious: When Filostrato receives the crown to serve as king for Day Four, he is described as a wolf leading sheep, and one of the young ladies calls his topic cruel.¹⁰ It is telling, therefore, that in this world of youthful escape, even Filostrato, who represents a potential threat to social order established by older generations, regards the advice of old people as worthy of respect. We can see, therefore, the extent to which Boccaccio's young people temper their displays of youthful transgression with praise for their sage old counselors.

For his final tale on Day Ten, Filostrato chooses to present a deadly confrontation between a young man and a very old man. Mithridanes, a young man, plans to kill Nathan, who is already eighty years old, because he is jealous of the latter's reputation for generosity and excellence. Despite his very old age, Nathan ultimately bests Mithridanes by generously offering the young man his life, demonstrating not only his magnanimity, but also his shrewd intelligence. Nathan is clearly old, but also wise. Furthermore, as narrator, Filostrato tells us that the young man's hatred for this old man is shameful, and he makes references with no hint of irony to the respect youth should show their elders, such as sons showing deference when speaking to fathers. Boccaccio's young storytellers lose their initial ambivalence and use their stories to illustrate the valuable roles the elderly play in a world where excess can lead to chaos and destruction. Although some critics, such as Aldo Bernardo, accuse the brigata of enjoying themselves selfishly and avoiding all contact with the Black Plague,¹¹ I believe their praise for

¹⁰ Marilyn Migiel, in "Encrypted Messages: Men, Women, and Figurative Language in *Decameron* 5.4," *Philological Quarterly* 77 (Winter 1998): 1–13, sees Filostrato as menacing to women, arguing that his main message for these women is the consolidation of power relations among men and the supremacy of males.

¹¹ See, for example, Aldo Bernardo, "The Plague as Key to Meaning in Boccaccio's "*Decameron*," *The Black Death: The Impact of the Fourteenth-Century Plague*, ed. Daniel Williman. Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 13 (Binghamton: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies,

the elderly, whom the disease has carried away in such large numbers, shows an undercurrent of anxiety below the surface of their tales.

If we look at the tales that Chaucer tells forty years later, the differences in the attitudes of Chaucer's youth are striking. A comparison between this last tale of Filostrato's and the "Pardoner's Tale" demonstrates these differences. In both Filostrato's last tale and "The Pardoner's Tale," old men tell dangerous and arrogant young men that they wish to die, but the reactions of the youth lead to dramatically different outcomes. Nathan, in Filostrato's story, tells Mithridanes that he has had the use of his life now for eighty years and has little of it left, so he will give it up rather than cling to it until Nature takes it from him against his will. In words similar to those of Chaucer's old man, Nathan says:

Piccol dono è donare cento anni: quanto adunque è minor donarne sei o otto che io a starci abbia? Prendila adunque, se ella t'aggrada, io te ne priego; per ciò che, mentre vivuto ci sono, niuno ho ancor trovato che desiderata l'abbia, nè so quando trovar me ne possa veruno, se tu non la prendi che la dimandi. E se pure avvenisse che io ne dovessi alcun trovare, conosco che, quanto più la guarderò, di minor pregio sarà; e però, anzi che ella divenga più vile, prendila, io te ne priego. (1120-21)

[Even if one were to give away a hundred years, it would not amount to much of a gift; and surely it is a much more trivial matter to give away the six or eight years of my life that still remain to me. Take it then, if you want it, I do implore you; for during all the years I have lived here, I have never yet found anyone who wanted it, and if you do not take it, now that you have asked for it, I doubt whether I shall ever find anyone else. But even if I should happen to do so, I realize that the longer I keep it, the less valuable it becomes; take it therefore, I beg you, before it loses its worth entirely; 748].

After hearing the old man's offer, the young man in Filostrato's story is transformed and expresses deep shame for wanting to take the old man's life:

Tolga Iddio, che così cara cosa come la vostra vita è, non che io, da voi dividendola, la prenda, ma pur la disideri, come poco avanti faceva; alla quale non che io diminuissi gli anni suoi, ma io l'aggiugnerei volentier de' miei, se io potessi. (1121)

[God forbid," said Mithridanes, feeling deeply ashamed, "that I should even contemplate taking so precious a thing as your life, as until just now I was thinking of doing, let alone that I should actually deprive you of it. Far from wanting to shorten its years, I would gladly augment them with some of my own, if such a thing were possible;" 748]

The tale ends with the two generations in accord as the young man has learned to honor the very existence of an old man.

When we turn to the "Pardoner's Tale," we see the same emphasis on extreme old age as the old man wretchedly knocks on mother earth to let him in to give his bones rest. Since he appears to be as close to physical death as possible, the young rioters believe that his decrepit physical state means he is in league with Death. They accuse him of being Death's spy and a false thief ready to slay young folk.¹² They view old people as their enemies. Although the old man reminds them that the scriptures say to honor an old man, these young men ignore his counsel and threaten him into telling them where to find Death. They die as a result. In her article "The Convention of the Old Man's Lament in the *Pardoner's Tale*," Alicia Nitecki argues that, despite the convention of veneration for the wisdom of old people, most writers in the fourteenth century, including Chaucer, model their old people on the decrepit old creatures who lament their mortality in the tradition of the sixth-century Roman poet Maximianus and the medieval Pope Innocent III (d. 1216). In these portrayals, the "moral nature of the old man himself is normally ambiguous; the aged figure is frequently ludicrous or contemptible regardless of his didactic role."¹³ There has been considerable debate among critics over the nature and implications of this character, but no one has seen him as representing the admirable qualities of old age.¹⁴ His inability to die is often seen as an inability to achieve eternal life after death.¹⁵ He is certainly not able to resolve or transform the conflict in the lives of the angry young men, and they, in turn, would not listen to him even if he could.

The dramatic changes in social demographics referred to earlier may explain this pronounced shift in attitude between 1348 and the 1390s. Later waves of the Black Plague greatly reduced the numbers of young people in Europe, leading to an unusually large number of old people in the population. According to J. S. Russell, the death rate from the Black Plague didn't peak until the years 1377–1400, when Chaucer was writing his mature works, and it was these later epidemics and endemic plague that killed off young people in such dramatic numbers.¹⁶ Chaucer and his close patrons, such as John of Gaunt, were now the older generation at court. While life expectancy in England dropped from 35.3 years for men born

¹² Peter G. Beidler, "The Plague and Chaucer's Pardoner," *Chaucer Review* 16 (1982): 257–269, cites the young men's fear of the plague and says the treasure was probably left by a plague victim.

¹³ Alicia Nitecki, "The Convention of the Old Man's Lament in the *Pardoner's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 16 (1981): 76–84; here 76–77. See also John M. Steadman, "Old Age and *Contemptus Mundi* in the *Pardoner's Tale*," *Medium Aevum* 33 (1964): 121–30. In *The Art of the Canterbury Tales* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1965), 127, Paul Ruggiers says the Old Man shows "Age waiting painfully yet meekly upon the will of God."

¹⁴ See, for example, James Rhodes, "Motivation in Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale*: Winner Take Nothing" *Chaucer Review* 17 (1982): 40–61. Also R. P. Miller, "Chaucer's Pardoner and the Scriptural Eunuch," *Speculum* 30 (1955): 180–99.

¹⁵ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1991), 402–03.

¹⁶ Russell, "Late Medieval Population Patterns," 167.

between 1200 and 1275 to 17.3 for men born between 1348 and 1375, the life expectancy for men 60 years old actually increased in that same period by almost two years.¹⁷ Shulamit Shahar notes that thirty percent of the members of the House of Lords during the period of 1350–1500 lived past the age of 60.¹⁸ These high numbers of old people had an unusually large impact on late fourteenth-century European society. Although the following figures are from Tuscany, they may represent the picture in other parts of Europe as well: 14.6% of the population is over 60 in 1427, which is almost three times the 5.7% over 60 in the mid 1500s when the population had stabilized.¹⁹ Young men resented not only the way that property and power were kept in the hands of these old men, but also the way that younger women made marriages with them. Even Christine de Pizan brings up the bickering between the old and the young in *The Treasure of the City of Ladies*.²⁰ Minois argues that the amount of attention she gives to improving the relationships between these two age groups suggests how seriously plague demographics had exacerbated the usual tensions between them.²¹ Chaucer does not show us young men praising the wisdom of these large numbers of old people.

The very first tale of the *Canterbury Tales*, in fact, introduces us to the conflict between the generations whose motif will weave in and out of later tales to come. Although no age is given for the Knight, the dates for the battles and sieges in which he took part range from 1344 to 1386, a span of forty-two years.²² Even if he had fought at Algezir, his earliest battle, as a teenager, he would now be close to sixty years old. Following the tradition of designating classical heroes as characterized by “fortitudo et sapientia,” Chaucer’s description of the Knight in the General Prologue states that “though that he were worthy, he was wys” (l. 68), and he is again called wise when he agrees to tell the first story on the pilgrimage. The stories, thus, begin with an old but wise narrator, and he chooses to tell a story about Theseus, a character with whom the Knight seems to identify, someone he says has “wysdom” (l. 865).²³ The conflict that “wise” Theseus has to adjudicate is brought about by two young men’s desires for a beautiful young woman, and

¹⁷ Georges Minois, *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*. Trans. Sarah Hanbury Tenison. (1987; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 213.

¹⁸ Shulamit Shahar, “Who Were Old in the Middle Ages?” *Social History of Medicine* 6.3 (1993): 313–341; here 339.

¹⁹ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 217.

²⁰ Christine de Pisan, *The Treasure of the City of Ladies or The Book of the Three Virtues*, trans. Sarah Lawson (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 164–67.

²¹ Minois, *History of Old Age*, 216; 221–22.

²² Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed., ed. John H. Fisher (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1989), 10, n. 51. All quotations from Chaucer’s work will come from this edition, and fragment and line numbers will be given in the text of the paper.

²³ V[erdel] A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1984), 134.

Theseus notes the divisions between love and wisdom: "And yet they wenen for to been ful wyse / That serven love, for aught that may bifalle." (I. 1804–06)

As others have argued, irony abounds here because Theseus's own record with women is quite checkered.²⁴ Furthermore, Theseus's harsh treatment of these two young men is questionable, and the text itself uses the words "cruel" and "crueltee" to describe their treatment (I. 1382, I. 1543).

Even more puzzling, however, is the message Theseus, and presumably Chaucer's Knight, delivers about death. In a passage after Arcite has died in the last battle over Emelye, Theseus's "olde fader Egeus, / That knew this worldes transmutacioun," is said to comfort Theseus by reminding him that death ends all earthly sorrow (I. 2838–2839). The wisdom of old age that Egeus passes on to his son, then, is the same bleak message about death that Theseus passes on to the next generation when he explains why Palamon and Emelye should stop mourning Arcite's death.²⁵ I cannot agree with Alicia Nitecki when she identifies Egeus as the "only example of an old and wise man" in fourteenth-century English literature.²⁶ Furthermore, after arguing that "thanne is it *wysdom*, as it thynketh me, / To maken vertu of necessitee," Theseus undercuts the worthiness of old knights by claiming that it is better for someone to die young than "whan his name *apalled is for age*, / For al forgeten is his vassellage" (I. 3041–3042; emphasis mine). Although this philosophy is standard for epic heroes, Theseus's devaluing of the older knight is another example of the irony that many critics see underlying Chaucer's "Knight's Tale." Moreover, the tale raises the seminal question for critics of why a wise old knight would begin this spiritual voyage to Canterbury with a story in which elderly characters tell young people to live for today.²⁷ Underneath the surface, this paean to order raises more questions about age and wisdom than it answers.

In the second of its two references to the horrors of plague, the tale explicitly places the blame for this disease that is targeting the young on an old father—Saturne.²⁸ Chaucer uses "olde" or "elde" five times in six lines to describe Saturne while also linking old age to wisdom:

Til that the pale Saturnus the colde,
That knew so manye of adventures olde,
Foond in his olde experience an art

²⁴ Bernard Harder, "Fortune's Chain of Love: Chaucer's Irony in Theseus' Marriage Counselling," *University of Windsor Review* 18 (1984): 47–52; here 51.

²⁵ Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 204.

²⁶ Alicia Nitecki, "The Convention of the Old Man's Lament," 83, n.3.

²⁷ Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, 156, says the pilgrimage in the "Knight's Tale" is Egeus's journey toward death, not the Christian journey to God.

²⁸ D. Vance Smith, "Plague, Panic Space, and the Tragic Medieval Household," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 98.3 (1999): 367–414; here 400. See also the contribution to this volume by Harry Peters.

That he ful soone hath plesed every part.
 As sooth is seyde, elde hath greet advantage;
 In elde is bothe wysdom and usage;
 Men may the olde atreene, and nocht atrede. (I. 2443–2449)

As the climactic ending to the passage listing Saturn's destructive powers, he says "my lookyng is the fader of pestilence," meaning that he is responsible for sending plague (I. 2469). This line is followed by Saturn's assurance to Venus that he will arrange things in the upcoming battle between Arcite and Palamon to go her way. Saturn's actions leading to Arcite's horse throwing him, therefore, are set in a context of an old father who might just as well send a plague. As Harry Peters's article on Jupiter and Saturn in this volume illustrates, Saturn represents the negative side of old age. As he tries to resolve the problems of these young lovers, Chaucer's Knight, therefore, has aligned himself with a series of male figures whose decisions and advice are questionable. The Knight certainly does not evoke praise and honor from the young men whose lives he controls.²⁹ Since Chaucer is now himself an old man, the motif introduced here of old men who exhibit questionable wisdom creates an ironical subtext to his commentary and the tales he tells in the *Canterbury Tales* that follow.³⁰

By highlighting the antagonism toward old men who try to rein in youthful desires, the two fabliaux that follow engage in the dialogue Chaucer's Knight has begun over these two distinct stages of adult life. At the same time that the "Miller's Tale" displays his antagonism toward the Knight's social class and its ideal of order, the tale also shows the Miller's contempt for an old man in a position of authority, whether it be the Knight or a husband. Laura Kendrick uses the analogy of the conflicts between generations to describe the relationship between the two tales:

Whereas age triumphs over youth in the romance of the "Knight's Tale," the Miller reverses the equation in his fabliau, wherein the child characters (including the desirous Alison) easily escape the "father's" control to satisfy their own erotic desires (with each other) and their aggressive, punitive ones as well.³¹

"The Miller's Tale," a story in which an old man is cuckolded by his young wife and a student, sends an unambiguous signal that many of Chaucer's pilgrims will not be singing the praises of a wiser, but older generation. The old husband's key

²⁹ Laura Kendrick, in *Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the Canterbury Tales*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 119, argues that Palamon and Arcite turn their anger against each other rather than showing their anger with Theseus openly.

³⁰ Robert Levine, "Gower as Gerontion: Oneiric Autobiography in the *Confessio Amantis*," *Medievalist* 5 (1992): 81–96, argues that the English poem *Confessio Amantis* by Chaucer's friend Gower also reflects ironically on his unhappiness with old age.

³¹ Kendrick, *Chaucerian Play: Comedy and Control in the Canterbury Tales*, 122.

fault in this tale is, in fact, his lack of wisdom.³² Although the easily duped husband is a standard character in the fabliau tradition, Chaucer extends his lack of understanding beyond simple gullibility to explore the motifs already established about old age. Calling his wit "rude," the Miller says John the Carpenter would never have married young Alyson if he had known Cato's maxim that "Men sholde wedden after hire estaat, / For youthe and elde is often at debaat." (I. 3229–30). Though these lines appear within the context of suitable partners for marriage, the Miller is also asserting his firm belief in an antagonistic relationship between these two age groups.

While disparaging human attempts to understand the world and act wisely, the old husband here sounds much like Theseus with his acceptance of blind fate: "A man woot litel what hym shal bityde" (I. 3450). He even goes so far as to celebrate the ignorance that leads to blind acceptance: "Men sholde nat knowe of Goddes pryvetee. / Ye, blessed be alwey a lewed man / That noght but oonly his bileve kan!" (I. 3454–3456)

This silly old man is no Noah, saving the world through his blind acceptance of God's commands, and earns nothing but derision from the people in the town. Through his tale, the Miller, whose youth is indicated by his bright red hair that has not grayed and his physical strength that still wins prizes, must think he has bested the old Knight in storytelling quite handily.³³

When we turn to the "Reeve's Tale," the Reeve tells the others that he is a carpenter to explain why he sees the Miller's humiliation of the cuckolded carpenter as a personal assault on himself. Before this, however, he has complained at length about the horrors he has experienced as an old man. Kolve argues that the "ugly, self-indulgent poetry of error" is meant to highlight the Reeve's lack of understanding of a Christian afterlife.³⁴ While acknowledging this, we can recognize at the same time the irony of his aligning himself with the old characters in the tales that precede his. Does he see himself as a Saturn figure? Chaucer tells us in his description from the General Prologue that the others on the farm are afraid of him as "of the deeth" (I. 605). Furthermore, the General

³² Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, 210.

³³ The other fabliaux in the *Canterbury Tales* carry much the same message. Holly A. Crocker, in "Performative Passivity and Fantasies of Masculinity in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 38.2 (2003): 178–98; here 185, argues that the problem with old January in the *Merchant's Tale* is his trying to fit himself into the wrong model, an old man trying to act as a young, potent knight.

³⁴ Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, 233. Edward Vasta, "How Chaucer's Reeve Succeeds," *Criticism* 25.1 (1983): 1–12; here 2, states that his prologue on old age shows his "moral, social, and intellectual stupidity." Paul A. Olson, "The Reeve's Tale: Chaucer's Measure for Measure," *Studies in Philology* 59 (1962): 1–17; here 7, argues that the Reeve's prologue shows false piety. Paul Ruggiers, *The Art of the Canterbury Tales*, 70–71, suggests a number of possible interpretations for the Reeve's confession including the possibility that it is an expression of "Chaucer's own sober and thoughtful process into old age."

Prologue tells us that he controls all of his lord's possessions because his lord is only twenty years old. Despite his physical state, this repugnant character obviously sees himself as a powerful force in control of the young people around him. Alluding directly to Boccaccio's use of the leek to describe his amorous desires in the introduction to Day Four of the *Decameron*, the Reeve uses the leek's white head and green tail to confess that although he might still desire young women, he cannot act on his desires anymore:

For in oure wyl ther stiketh evere a nayl,
To have an hoor heed and a grene tayl,

As hath a leek; for though oure myght be goon,
Oure wyl desireth folie evere in oon. (I. 3877-80)

After listing the four live sparks still at work in old people, "avaunting, lying, anger, [and] covetise," the Reeve explains that nothing is left for old people except dotage (I. 3884; I. 3898). While impotence may help the Reeve explain his earlier marital problems, his calling attention to his physical weakness may also serve to disarm his young victims, who will not immediately recognize his cunning strength.

Scholars like Britton J. Harwood see no connection between his prologue emphasizing his old age and his tale in which two young men set out to dupe an old man.³⁵ However, the story fits the role he wishes to play as a friend to youth who think that they can outsmart older people. Although he outwardly grants the young men in his story their physical pleasures at the Miller's expense, his real contempt for them shows when he associates them with an untethered horse who gallops "toward the fen ther wilde mares renne" (I. 4065).³⁶ Since he has just told us that only boasting, lying, anger, and covetousness are left to him as an old man, he has warned us to look beyond the surface of his story; and there, instead of a study in wisdom, the Reeve offers us a study of Saturn-like disingenuous cunning in old age.

Continuing the motif begun by the two tales that precede it, "The Reeve's Tale" also emphasizes the conflict between youth and the elderly in a secular world. Moreover, the passage in which the Host makes the Reeve stop complaining and get on with his story reenacts the enmity between these two groups. The younger listeners show no sympathy for the pain or other afflictions the elderly experience. Chaucer's pilgrims do not want to hear old people's complaints.

³⁵ Britton J. Harwood, "Psychoanalytic Politics: Chaucer and Two Peasants," *English Literary History* 68.1 (2001): 2-27; here 13.

³⁶ See John Block Friedman, "A Reading of Chaucer's Reeve's Tale," *Chaucer Review* 2.1 (1967): 8-19; here 9.

A last Chaucerian tale that focuses most pointedly on the culture's views of old age is the second tale Chaucer assigns himself, "The Tale of Melibee." Remarkably little has been said about the age of the older counselors in this tale.³⁷ Arguing that "the problem posed throughout the tale is how to discern what is true counsel," Ruth Waterhouse and Gwen Griffiths focus their examination on Chaucer's use of the words "conseil" and "wise."³⁸ Paul Strohm also examines the way in which "rash Melibee's soul is defective in respect to wisdom," but focuses his examination on Prudence's role as allegorical figure.³⁹ When Stephen G. Moore argues that the tale serves as a model of good decision-making, which includes seeking advice from true friends and wise relatives, his purpose is to explain why Melibee's apparent failures should instead be seen as a necessary stage in the decision-making process.⁴⁰

If we do examine the age conflict in the tale, we note that its opening line describes Melibee as a "yong man" (VII. 967). Although he is introduced as mighty and rich, Melibee is "desport[ing]" "into the feeldes hym to pleye" when his wife and daughter are attacked by his enemies (VII. 968). His youthful play underscores his immaturity, which becomes most clear when he says he doesn't know how to respond to evil acts. As Prudence tells Melibee to act wisely instead of crying foolishly for the loss of his daughter, her words seem to echo those of Theseus and Egeus. However, after quoting Seneca on the need for moderation, she brings in Job's lesson on keeping faith in the Lord so that her concept of wisdom is set within a Christian context.

Stressing the differences in their ages when the counselors whom Melibee has invited converge on his house, Chaucer calls them either "olde folk" or "yonge" (VII. 1004). The text then describes the first speakers, seasoned professionals who argue against war, as "wise" men who are said to speak by leave of others who are "wise," and then refers back to them as "the wise *old* men" (VII. 1011; 1021; 1035; emphasis mine). As Waterhouse and Griffiths note, Chaucer has added the word "wise" to his version of this passage taken from his French source, Renaud de Louen's *Livre de Melibee et Prudence*, so that he is consciously linking these speakers with wisdom.⁴¹ However, he has also added "old" to their descriptions,

³⁷ James Flynn, "The Art of Telling and the Prudence of Interpreting the *Tale of Melibee* and its Context," *Medieval Perspectives* 7 (1992): 53–63; here 56, changes the sense of Chaucer's point on age by summarizing it to say: "Call true, wise, and mature friends."

³⁸ Ruth Waterhouse and Gwen Griffiths, "'Sweet Wordes'" of Non-Sense: The Deconstruction of the Moral *Melibee*," *Chaucer Review* 23.4 (1989): 338–61; here 352–53.

³⁹ Paul Strohm, "The Allegory of the *Tale of Melibee*," *Chaucer Review* 2.1 (1967): 32–42; here 42.

⁴⁰ Stephen G. Moore, "Apply yourself: Learning While Reading the *Tale of Melibee*," *Chaucer Review* 38.1 (2003): 83–97; here 87–88.

⁴¹ Waterhouse and Griffiths, "Sweet Wordes," 354.

which indicates he intentionally wants his listeners to envision "old" counselors. The young people, on the other hand, are described as a ranting mob:

Up stirten thanne the yonge folk at onces, and the mooste partie of that compaignye scorned the olde wise men, and begonnen to make noyse, and seyden that / right so as whil that iren is hoot men shoulde smyte, right so men shoulde wreken hir wronges while that they been fresshe and newe. And with loud voys they criden, "Werre! Werre!" [War! War!] (VII. 1034–1035)

When a character described as "oon of thise olde wise" tries to get the young men to listen to him, they shout him down, and the narrator explains that it is useless to preach to those who are annoyed by a sermon (VII. 1036). The wise old man's final words are "the commune proverbe is sooth, that good conseil wanteth whan it is most nede" (VII. 1048).

Not surprisingly, Prudence advises Melibee to ignore the advice of young folk because their counsel is not ripe (VII. 1199). When she summarizes the errors he has made in seeking counsel, she begins by noting that instead of calling his "trewe frendes olde and wise," he had called "straunge folk and yong folk, false flatereres and enemys reconsiled, and folk that doon yow reverence withouten love" (VII. 1244; VII. 1245). As expected, the advice offered by the old counselors is the best advice, and Prudence emphasizes this point by declaring that the "olde and wise conseilours" said "right wisely and right sooth" (VII. 1341; 1343).

The tale offers no reason for the young men's contempt for the older men, but Prudence's view suggests that their angry disrespect is the norm then. Although critics disagree over the reason for Chaucer's choice of narrative features in the tale, most readers find the tale overly long and self-consciously didactic.⁴² While some scholars see it as morally edifying, others such as Trevor Whittock believe Chaucer is paying his listeners back for stopping his telling of his earlier tale.⁴³

"The Tale of Sir Thopas" is a young man's tale—a mindless plot about a young knight's wanderings described in terms of blatant sexual puns—and not the sort of story a man like Chaucer approaching sixty would be expected to tell.⁴⁴ On the other hand, with its lengthy, sententious, excessive moralizing, "The Tale of Melibee" is just as clearly not a young man's tale—to tell or to listen to. It seems as though Chaucer chose to retell the Melibee story in a most unengaging way. Lee

⁴² Edward E. Foster, "Has Anyone Here Read *Melibee*?" *Chaucer Review* 34.4 (2000): 398–409; here 400. Foster gives a good summary of the critical views on the tale. See Moore, "Apply Yourself: Learning While Reading the *Tale of Melibee*," 88, for an argument that Melibee's continual desire to exile his enemies isn't proof of failure.

⁴³ Trevor Whittock, *A Reading of the "Canterbury Tales"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 213. For an opposing view, see Foster, "Has Anyone Here Read *Melibee*," 398.

⁴⁴ C[arl] David Benson, "Their Telling Difference: Chaucer the Pilgrim and His Two Contrasting Tales," *Chaucer Review* 18 (1983): 61–76; here 72, calls the Thopas tale a "childish fantasy." See Glending Olson, "A Reading of the Thopas-Melibee Link," *Chaucer Review* 10 (1975): 147–53.

Patterson also sees the stylistic choice as intentional, arguing that Chaucer "is rejecting the pragmatic didacticism of *Melibee*."⁴⁵ With its ineffective narrative, the tale can be said to mirror the sermon the old wise man says annoys people who do not want to hear it. Just as the impetuous young men in the story refuse to listen to the old man's advice, Chaucer's audience might have quickly lost interest—as most modern readers do—in this dry piece, written by an old man moralizing about the need to listen to old men. Patterson, in fact, sees a link between Chaucer, who had been interrupted during "*Thopas*," the old man who is interrupted in "*Melibee*," and Prudence, who has to reiterate her advice because Melibee misses the point the first time.⁴⁶ The story itself enacts the very inefficacy of didactic instruction. Even after he hears his wise old counselors' advice and then listens to Prudence restate their advice and elaborate at length on why this is the right thing to do, Melibee still does not choose the right response.⁴⁷ Although we never learn what has happened to her, Sophie, or wisdom, does not return to Melibee by the end of the tale. And Melibee is not the only listener who misses the point: Harry Bailly's only response to the tome is to wish his mean and violent wife could learn something from Melibee's patient wife. As James Flynn says, "As a prudential Interpreter, Harry fails miserably."⁴⁸

With these pronounced conflicts between the generations brought on by the plague-skewed demographics, it is not surprising that Chaucer portrays a generation of young people who refuse to accept the advice of the elders they truly resent. In the stories Chaucer presents, even wise old men are shown no respect, and most of the old characters are far from wise. Given his own status as a member of the old generation who controls everything in late fourteenth-century England, Chaucer ironically narrates a tale that, while vividly describing the tensions between these groups, also enacts their inability to communicate in a meaningful way.

When we look back to Boccaccio's tales, young people might start off by flaunting their independence and questioning the wisdom of their elders' advice, but they turn back to embrace the conventional beliefs of the world they have lost where older figures can help resolve their problems. In 1348, the time that the initial wave of the Black Plague decimated the elderly population across Europe, Boccaccio's young story tellers challenge the wisdom of old people only half-

⁴⁵ Lee Patterson, "What Man Artow? Authorial Self-Definition in the *Tale of Sir Thopas* and *The Tale of Melibee*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 11 (1989): 117–79; here 123.

⁴⁶ Patterson, "What Man Artow?," 155.

⁴⁷ Patterson, "What Man Artow?," 158, argues that the ineffectiveness is the result of Prudence's using the wrong pedagogical method with Melibee. Her lists of sententious platitudes will not teach Melibee to interpret, reflect, or choose wise courses of actions.

⁴⁸ James Flynn, "The Art of Telling," 61. See also Patterson, "What Man Artow?," 154, for a discussion of Bailly's response.

heartedly as if, perhaps, they wished to preserve the sense of order represented by the older generation. By the 1380s and 90s, however, when it is the younger generations who succumb in the largest numbers to the Black Plague, Chaucer's young people resent the advice, the authority, the wealth, and even the very existence of the large numbers of old people who populate their world. All of the negative characteristics of old age are present in the characters of the *Canterbury Tales* without any of the positive features that can balance a society's view of this final stage of life. The anger and contempt Chaucer's young people display toward the elderly is not present in the *Decameron*. The shift in attitude toward old age will come later in the deadly second half of the fourteenth century as Chaucer's young people have to make their way through a much changed world.

Scholars have long recognized the way the Black Plague reconfigured the class and economic structures of the time, but other social values such as the concept of old age were transformed, too. Our understanding of old age goes beyond labeling the decades of human life. Often, the concept of old age a society holds is determined instead by the circumstances surrounding its elderly population. With its almost systematic pattern of ravishing first the old and then the young in European society, the Black Plague radically changed the circumstances of the elderly during the fourteenth century, and we can see the results of this in the societies described by two of the period's greatest writers.

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Jupiter and Saturn: Medieval Ideals of “Elde”

There are several medieval models of age, which consider life to be marked by three, four, six or seven stages, without any one model holding supremacy.¹ For the purpose of this paper we shall consider the four and seven stage models only, which are based on the hermeneutic lens of the Ptolemaic Universe, which considers the Earth to lie motionless at the center of the vast, visible and wheeling universe composed of concentric spheres which carry the Sun, Moon, planets and stars. This is the model of reality that was accepted until the sixteenth century, when it gave way to the heliocentric model of Copernicus.² The conception of the Ptolemaic universe varies in detail and a typical view is given in Figure 1, drawn primarily from the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer, as analyzed by Sigmund Eisner.³ The sublunary sphere also may be depicted as four concentric circles, with earth, the heaviest element, at the center, surrounded by water, air and fire.⁴

The connection with old age lies in the way that medieval poets see the passage of the seasons, from spring to winter, as a four stage model of life from birth to old age and death, buttressed by Christian belief in a Heaven that can be reached after death and judgment.⁵ Another model of old age is seen in the order of the concentric spheres of the Sun, Moon and planets, making a seven stage model of life, in which old age has two complementary faces, the first being associated with Jupiter, which can be likened to a diastolic heart beat that relaxes and enjoys the

¹ For a review of medieval age theory, see J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), Chapters 1,2; Georges Minois, *History of Old Age*, tr. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (1987; Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), Chapters 3, 5, 7, 8; Joel T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England*. The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), Chapter 11; and Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages* (1995; London and New York: Routledge, 1997), Chapter 1.

² See Edward Grant, *Planets, Stars, and Orbs: The Medieval Cosmos, 1200–1687* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 308–23.

³ Sigmund Eisner, “The Ram Revisited: A Canterbury Conundrum,” *Chaucer Review* 28–4 (1994): 330–43; here 330–35.

⁴ See Grant, *Planets, Stars, and Orbs*, diagram by Peter Apian, *Cosmographicus liber* (1524), 317.

⁵ Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

fruits of a well-spent life, but the second face is formed by Saturn, the last barrier before the stars, as a systolic heart beat of limitation, physical decay and death.

The mathematical definition of the model is given in Ptolemy's *Almagest*, which asserts that the Earth is of a spherical form, and is comprised of four elements, in the order of earth, water, air and fire. The Earth, in turn, is surrounded by seven celestial spheres which bear, in ascending order, the planetary orbits of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn.⁶ The planets in their turn are enclosed by the sphere of the fixed stars, against which they may be tracked through the signs of the zodiac.⁷ The fixed stars are enclosed by the non-physical realm of the *Primum Mobile* (First Movable or Cause), the source of all movement and life. The Ptolemaic model has nothing certain to say beyond the *Primum Mobile*, whereas the Christian adoption of the system asserts that the whole of creation is enfolded within the Empyrean Heaven, the dwelling place of God and all the Chosen.⁸

This is the model which C. S. Lewis most famously describes as "the discarded image," yet it is an image which "delights me as I believe it delighted our ancestors."⁹ Possibly the most famous classical appearance of the model is found in Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, leading to the great medieval depictions by Alan of Lille, in *The Plaint of Nature*, and by Dante, in *The Divine Comedy: Paradise*. The experience of age is explained by Macrobius as being caused by the Earth lying in the sublunary sphere, where "below the moon all is mortal and transitory," whereas "above the moon all things are eternal."¹⁰

Four Ages of Life

The first model of age that is derived from the Ptolemaic universe is the passage of the four seasons, which in Figure 1 is the passage of the Sun, occupying the

⁶ Claudius Ptolemy, *Ptolemy's Almagest*, trans. G. J. Toomer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), Book I.

⁷ There are actually two zodiacs, the Tropical and the Sidereal, which confusingly employ the same names for their twelve 30 degree segments. Figure 1, Chaucer's view, associates the Tropical Zodiac with the ninth sphere of the *Primum Mobile*. Eisner, "The Ram Revisited", argues that Chaucer was perfectly aware of both, and their longitudinal displacement (precession of the equinox). The precession of the equinox is identified and discussed in *Ptolemy's Almagest*, 321–38.

⁸ See Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, Cantos II, III and XXVII, tr. Charles S. Singleton. Bollingen Series LXXX (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 14–35, 300–11; Russell, *A History of Heaven*, 175–81; and Grant, *Planets, Stars, and Orbs*, 371–89.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (1963; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 216.

¹⁰ Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, tr. William Harris Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 73.

fourth sphere, through the Tropical Zodiac (depicted as the ninth sphere) in which it waxes from the Winter Solstice to the Spring Equinox and the Summer Solstice, before waning into the Autumn Equinox and the next Winter Solstice. An excellent example of this model is seen in two surviving diagrams given by the eleventh century monk Byrhtferth of Ramsay, which show the relationship between the Physical and the Physiological Fours.¹¹ The diagrams take the form of a cross superimposed on a circle, where the arms of the cross signify the four elements of creation (Earth, Water, Air and Fire), the four cardinal directions (North, South, East and West), and the four turning points of the seasons (Spring Equinox, Summer Solstice, Autumn Equinox, and Winter Solstice). The circle shows the twelve signs of the zodiac cut into quadrants by the cross, and the months that correspond with the signs, as follows:

Winter Solstice - then Capricorn (Jan.), Aquarius (Feb.), Pisces (Mar.),
 Spring Equinox - then Aries (Apr.), Taurus (May), Gemini (Jun.),
 Summer Solstice - then Cancer (Jul.), Leo (Aug.), Virgo (Sep.),
 Autumn Equinox - then Libra (Oct.), Scorpio (Nov.), Sagittarius (Dec.).

Finally, below the signs and the months are shown the seasonal qualities, or the humors, and the ages of life that correspond with the above quarters, as seen in the Latin of the second diagram (Plate 2 in *The Ages of Man*), as follows:

Winter Solstice (onwards) - *Ver, Pueritia, xiiii annis, humidum & calidum,*
 Spring Equinox - *Aestas, Adolescentia, xxviii annis, calida & sicca,*
 Summer Solstice - *Autumnus, Iuventus, xlviii annis, siccus & frigidus,*
 Autumn Equinox - *Hiems, Senectus, lxx, lxxx annis, frigida & humida.*

[Spring, Infancy, 14 years, moist & hot - Summer, Adolescence, (to) 28 years old, hot & dry - Autumn, Manhood, (to) 48 years old, dry & cold - Winter, Old Age, (to) 70 (or) 80 years old, cold & moist.]

Ptolemy likens the passage of the year to the process of age, without assigning specific ages to the seasons, in the following way, with my emphases added:

There being no single beginning of the zodiac by nature as it is a circle, they postulate that the twelfth-part starting from the spring equinox, that of Aries, is also the starting point of them all, making the wet excess of the spring be the initial cause of the zodiac, *as though of a living thing*, and making the remaining seasons [the causes] for what comes next [in the zodiac]. This is because *the first age* of all living things, almost like the spring, has a surplus of wetness, being tender and still delicate. And *the second age*, which is up to the prime of life, has its surplus in the hot, almost like the summer. And *third age*, which is already past the prime and at the beginning of decay, already has

¹¹ Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 4–32, and Plates 1, 2; and Veronica Sekules, *Medieval Art*. Oxford History of Art (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 128–29.

its surplus in the dry, almost like the autumn. And *the last age* which is near dissolution, has its excess in the cold, as does the winter.¹²

This description of the seasons is based on the theory of the four qualities, namely, wet/dry, hot/cold, expressed in agricultural terms where spring marks the emergence of new life, summer is the time of fertile growth, autumn is the time of maturity and harvest, and winter is the time of greatest darkness and the cessation of life. The power of this natural model is evidenced most strongly in the annual cycle of light which, at the latitude of Oxford, grows from a brief eight hours of daylight at midwinter to sixteen hours of daylight, plus a long twilight, at midsummer.¹³ In this paper I am considering primarily the seasons at this latitude, representing Chaucer's England in which the economy rested primarily on an agricultural base and a failure of the harvest would lead to a shortage of cereal crops. Similarly, an exceptionally bitter winter, or disease, would reduce livestock, which made up another major component of the English diet. In short, good seasons yielded a surplus but bad seasons tended to starvation.¹⁴

One of the most memorable depictions of seasonal age in medieval literature is found in Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale*, summarized most neatly by Priscilla Martin as a tale where "an old knight wants a wife to ensure salvation, to gratify his lust with impunity, to provide an heir and he wants the best that his money can buy."¹⁵ He bears the name of Januarie, and starts to behave very strangely indeed after having passed his sixtieth birthday.¹⁶ Where once he lived life lasciviously, "and folwed ay his bodily delyt / On women, ther as was his appetyt" (1249–50), he becomes fixated now on the idea of marriage and uses his power and fortune to buy himself a suitable wife. His opinion of a suitable match is that she must be young, "She shal nat passe twenty yeer, certayn" (1417), and he sets his desire on "a mayden in the toun, / Which that of beautee hadde greet renoun, / Al were it so she were of smal degree; / Suffiseth hym hir yowthe and hir beautee"

¹² Claudius Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, Book I, trans. Robert Schmidt (Berkeley Springs WV: Golden Hind Press, 1994), 24–25.

¹³ See the calendar entries (Julian calendar) under "Quantitates diei artificialis," in *The Kalendarium of Nicholas of Lynn*, The Chaucer Library, ed. Sigmund Eisner (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980).

¹⁴ For an overview of fourteenth century agriculture and famine, see Norman F. Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague* (2001; New York: Harper Perennial, 2002), 63, 66–68, 198–99; and, for a detailed study of English conditions, see David Stone, *Decision Making in Medieval Agriculture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3–21, 45–72, 272–76.

¹⁵ Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer's Women: Nuns, Wives and Amazons* (1990, reprinted with alterations; Houndmills: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996), 105.

¹⁶ All Chaucer references are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, Third Edition (1933; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

(1623–26). The tale turns on the theme of the misalliance of old age with youth, or as Chaucer says alliteratively, "Oold fish and yong flesh wolde I have fayn" (1418).

The physical horror of the misalliance is seen on the morning after his wedding to the beautiful maiden, named May, when he sings for joy after his nightlong labor, and "The slakke skyn aboute his nekke shaketh / whil that he sang, so chaunteth he and craketh. / But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte, / Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte, / In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene" (1849–53).¹⁷ The theme of age is seen, of course, in the names given to the characters in the tale, where Januarie points to winter, and May is the month of high spring. As we have seen above, January (at the start of Winter) is associated with the qualities of cold and moist, whereas May (in the middle of Spring) is associated with the qualities of hot and moist, and there is a mismatch between the heat of youth and the coldness of old age.¹⁸

However, there are problems involved in reducing life to four stages. Turning back to re-examining Byrhtferth's diagrams we find three difficulties. First, the zodiac signs are aligned neatly with the months, which is incorrect because the civil calendar has months of unequal length which are not anchored into the solstices and equinoxes, and, in its Julian form, was running approximately eight days slow by the time of Byrhtferth.¹⁹ Second, the classification of the seasons as *starting from*, rather than being *centered on*, the solstices and equinoxes, defies physical experience: e.g., Capricorn, in the depths of winter, is the darkest part of the year and can scarcely be termed the start of Spring.²⁰

The months of spring are invoked more accurately in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* where she roams abroad after the season of Lent, gossips with her female friends, dresses in her best finery, and finds the adulterous liaison that eventuates in her fifth marriage, "For evere yet I loved to be gay, / And for to walke in March, Averill, and May" (545–46). Third, the ages of life that are assigned to each season are too wide, as we see in the case of Januarie, in *The Merchant's Tale*, who passes sixty years of age before he says to his advisors, "Freendes, I am hoor and oold, /

¹⁷ The grotesque mismatch, and parallels with months of the year, are discussed by Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 76–79, 159–61.

¹⁸ For discussions of humors and *senex amans* in the *Merchant's Tale*, see Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 156–61; Carol A. Everest, "Sight and Sexual Performance in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Masculinities in Chaucer*, ed. Peter G. Biedler. Chaucer Studies, XXV (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), 91–104; and Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 62–73, 87–97.

¹⁹ See *The Kalendarium of Nicholas of Lynn* for the relationship between the months in the Julian year, and the Tropical Zodiac. The Spring Equinox is shown as falling around 12th March, which was corrected eventually when the Gregorian calendar of 1582 was adopted and restored the Spring Equinox (first degree of Aries) to fall around 21st/22nd March.

²⁰ The variation in daylight becomes greater as latitude increases. As noted earlier, Byrhtferth would experience over 16 hours of daylight at mid-summer, and just 8 hours at mid-winter. By contrast, at Ptolemy's latitude, in Alexandria, mid-winter sunlight is only 4 hours shorter than mid-summer.

And almost, God woot, on my pites brynke (i.e. on my grave's edge)" (1400–01). The seasonal model considers old age to start after passing forty-eight years of age, whereas the planetary model, to be discussed below, counts old age as having two faces, the first starting at fifty-six years of age, marked ideally by honour and ease, and the second starting at sixty-eight years of age, with inevitable decline and death.

Finally, the diagrams of Byrhtferth carry a view of creation which we need to keep in mind before moving on to the seven stage model of age. The diagrams place God at the center, under the Latin title DEUS (Plate 1, Burrow, *Ages of Man*, facing p. 20), or as a symbolic circle (Plate 2, Burrow, *Ages of Man*, facing p. 21), surrounded in each diagram by the name of man, ADAM, with the letters aligned toward the cardinal directions. In this way all of creation is presented visually as being grounded in God, with man created in God's image. This brings to mind Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, as translated by Chaucer, where we are shown the seasons, the mutability of life, and the immanence of God:

By thise same causes (the elements) the floury yer yeldeth swote smelles in the first somer sesoun warmynge; and the hote somer dryeth the cornes; and autumpne comith ayein hevyn of apples; and the fletyng reyn bydeweth the winter. This atempraunce noryscheth and bryngeth forth alle thinges that brethith lif in this world; and thilke same atempraunce, ravysschyng, hideth and bynymeth, and drencheth undir the lasted deth, alle thinges iborn. Among thise thinges sitteth the heye makere, kyng and lord, welle and bygynnyng, lawe and wys juge to don equite, and governeth and enclyneth the bridles of thinges."²¹ Scripturally, this is consistent with the answer given by Jesus to the Pharisees, concerning the whereabouts of the Kingdom of God, as recorded in the Vulgate version of Luke 17:21, "ecce enim regnum Dei intra vos est" (For lo, the kingdom of God is within you).²²

Similarly, Alan of Lille, in *The Plaint of Nature*, sees man as the microcosm of the universe, and his life is likened both to the passage of a single day, and to the passage of the seasons. Dawn is equated to Spring, noon to Summer, the ninth hour (mid-afternoon) to Autumn and sunset to Winter, when "old age gives notice of life's evening, the Winter's cold forces man's head to turn white with the hoar frost of old age."²³ Significantly, Alan of Lille describes the zodiac and the planetary spheres in this work but chooses to follow the seasonal model of age rather than the planetary model.

²¹ Chaucer, *Boece*, Book IV, Metrum 6.

²² *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, 4th Edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), and *The Holy Bible: Douai* version, trans. from the Latin Vulgate (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1956).

²³ Alan of Lille, *The Plaint of Nature*, trans. James J. Sheridan. *Mediaeval Sources in Translation*, 26 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1980), 76–85, 118–25; here 123.

Seven Ages of Life

The seven stage model is not openly employed by Chaucer, however his knowledge of Astronomy and Astrology is evident throughout *The Canterbury Tales*. Ptolemy is singled out in *The Miller's Tale*, another satire on the misalliance of age with youth, where a rich old carpenter, named John, guards jealously his lively young wife, Alisoun, but his boarder, a sly Oxford clerk named Nicholas, proudly displays a copy of Ptolemy's *Almagest* (the primer for the study of Astronomy and Astrology) amongst the books kept in his bedroom. Nicholas fabricates a prediction of a flood to get the carpenter out of the marital bed, and so, just as happens with Januarie and May, "Thus swyved was this carpenteris wyf, / For al his keypyng and his jalousye" (3850–51).²⁴ The tale, like so many others in *The Canterbury Tales*, is replete with astrological allusions which lose their impact unless we come to grips with the medieval schooling in Astronomy and Astrology, together comprising the subject of *Astronomia*, one of the seven Liberal Arts.²⁵

For now, let us take a closer look at the *Almagest*, and go back in our imagination with Nicholas the clerk to Oxford.²⁶ The modern English translation makes up a volume of 693 pages, and the mathematics and spherical trigonometry contained therein would be a formidable hurdle for a medieval undergraduate, and this is just the Astronomy. The Astrological schooling requires further texts, from Ptolemy and others, described by Chaucer as coming from many languages, from Greek, Arabic, Hebrew and Latin, such that "in alle these langages and in many moo han these conclusions (rules of astrology) ben suffisantly lerned and taught."²⁷ However, the difficulty of the subject is eased considerably after Nicholas passes his exams in Astronomy because, in practice, there are available published (hand-written) tables of planetary positions, derived from the formulae set out by Ptolemy.²⁸ The hardest task that he faces, if he wishes to become a

²⁴ See, for example, discussions of the old carpenter in Martin, *Chaucer's Women*, 72–75; Martin Blum, "Negotiating Masculinities: Erotic Triangles in the *Miller's Tale*," *Masculinities in Chaucer*, 37–52; here 40–42; and Blamires, *Chaucer, Ethics and Gender*, 47–62.

²⁵ Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, 185–87; Sekules, *Medieval Art*, 132–33, plate 92; J. C. Eade, *The Forgotten Sky: A Guide to Astrology in English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 104–45; and Geoffrey Chaucer, *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*, ed. Sigmund Eisner (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), latest edition and bibliography.

²⁶ For an outline of the basics of the subject, see Vol. II of *The English Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. Macaulay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1900), Book VII, lines 191–1500.

²⁷ Chaucer, *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*, Introduction, lines 30–40.

²⁸ Sophie Page, *Astrology in Medieval Manuscripts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 15–17. Tables (ephemerides) such as these are still produced, for persons who wish to practice astrology on a manual basis rather than rely on the many computer programs available, for example, see

serious astrologer, is to keep track of equinoctial time ($1/24^{\text{th}}$ of the solar day) in order to calculate the Ascendant, the exact degree and minute of the Tropical Zodiac rising in the east at a moment in time, for the purposes of the various branches of astrology.²⁹

He must also convert equal hours back into unequal hours ($1/12^{\text{th}}$ of the day between sunrise and sunset, or the night between sunset and sunrise) in order to make judgments based on the quality of the planet that rules that hour.³⁰ He is assisted in these matters by owning a *Kalendarium*, such as that of Nicholas of Lynn (see notes 13 and 19, earlier), which covers a greater period of time than the ephemerides of the planets. The *Kalendarium* relates the civil and Church calendar to the positions of the Sun and the phases of the Moon, predicts eclipses, tabulates the length of day for the latitude of Oxford, contains tables with which to determine the twelve houses of the horoscope for a given degree of the Tropical Zodiac rising in the East (the Ascendant), sets out the planetary hours for the days and nights of the week, and gives advice on the auspicious or dangerous times for medical diagnosis and treatment.³¹

Armed with these books, and familiar with the calculation of time by astrolabe, he is ready to fool the unlearned with his conviction that “A clerk hadde litherly biset his whyle, / But if he coude a carpenter bigyle” (3299–300). As an aside, the parish clerk Absolon, his rival in the wooing of Alison, would also need to know how to use the *Kalendarium* in the medical phases of his occupation as the village barber and minor clerk, “Wel koude he laten blood, and clippe and shave, / And maken a charter of lond or acquitaunce” (3326–27).³²

Nicholas would have learnt that the days of the week are named after the planets, with each day taking its character from its ruling planet. Saturday, Sunday and Monday are named after Saturn, Sun and Moon. Tuesday (Mardi in French, and Dienstag in German) is named after the Saxon version of Mars. Wednesday (Mercredi in French [Mittwoch in German = middle of the week]) is named after Woden, the Saxon version of Mercury. Thursday (Jeudi in French, Donnerstag in German) is named after Thor, the Saxon Jupiter. Friday (Vendredi in French, Freitag in German) is named after Freya, the Saxon Venus. The order of association, of planet to day, is not accidental and it interlocks with the system of planetary rulership of the unequal hours, as we shall see next.

Raphael's Astronomical Ephemeris of the Planet's Places for 2001 (London: W. Foulsham, 2000).

²⁹ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, Book III, 3; and Chaucer, *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*, Part II, 4.

³⁰ See Ptolemy's *Almagest*, 23; and Chaucer, *A Treatise on the Astrolabe*, Part II, 11.

³¹ The *Kalendarium* of Nicholas of Lynn is a form of almanac, and in my view ought to be understood before moving on to study the astrolabe and astrology, in order to be able to sift through, and understand, the considerable Chaucer scholarship that has been expended on these matters.

³² For instructions on the best hours for letting blood or administering medicine, see *The Kalendarium* of Nicholas of Lynn, 206–23.

The planetary hours, where the length of the hour depends on the changing time between sunrise and sunset, are counted from Saturday through Friday in the reverse order to the order of the spheres, i.e., the hours run backwards, starting from Saturn. In this way, the hour of sunrise on Saturday is ruled by Saturn, the next hour is ruled by Jupiter, the next by Mars and so on through the day and night, until after twenty four hours have passed, we find that the dawning hour of Sunday is ruled by the Sun. Similarly, the first daylight hour of Monday is ruled by the Moon, Tuesday by Mars, Wednesday by Mercury, Thursday by Jupiter, Friday by Venus.³³

We begin now to see the intricacy of the cosmic system, in which Nicholas must take into account the day and the hour, and the exact layout of the seven planets, against the fixed stars, within the tropical framework established by the Ascendant (literally, to look to what is coming to birth in the east), in order to judge a nativity, or to answer a question, or to treat an illness.³⁴

After this brief introduction we may next look to see how the planets were considered to rule the ages of life. The great authority is again Ptolemy, in his *Tetrabiblos*, where he turns from Astronomy to Astrology. In this work he depicts the passage of life as being governed by the planets, similar to an ascent through the spheres, back to the stars, such as described by Macrobius and Dante. The correlation to the ages of man is made in the reverse order to the hours, i.e., we count age from the fastest out to the slowest planet. Accordingly, the sphere of the Moon rules to age four, followed by Mercury to age fourteen, Venus to age twenty-two, Sun to age forty-one, Mars to age fifty-six, Jupiter to age sixty-eight, and Saturn to the end of life. Ptolemy warns that these divisions of age are general and are modified according to the properties discovered in the nativity, i.e. the planetary positions at the time of birth, because the astrologers were very aware, as Albrecht Classen puts it in the Introduction to this volume, that "old age means nothing if judged by a simple chronological perspective...almost everything depends on the social context." Ptolemy warns likewise that the judgment of a nativity (the chart of the planets at birth) must take into account both the race and circumstances of the person, within the general chronological perspective that follows below.³⁵

³³ *The Kalendarium of Nicholas of Lynn*, 176–77; Guido Bonatti, *Liber Astronomiae*, trans. Robert Hand (Berkeley Springs, WV: Golden Hind Press, 1995), Part III, Chapter 11; and see, for a modern description, Nicholas Campion, *The Practical Astrologer* (Twickenham: Hamlyn Publishing, 1987), 13.

³⁴ For a modern overview of the practice of medieval astrology, see Joseph Crane, *A Practical Guide to Traditional Astrology* (Orleans: ARHAT Press, 1997).

³⁵ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, Book IV, 10.

The Moon rules infancy and the rapid development of the body and soul, while Mercury takes over the period of childhood and the development of the rational part of the soul, with learning and the display of natural traits of character. Venus then rules the age of adolescence until age twenty-two, with a description that suggests that the problems of parenting have not changed, displaying the effects in the young adult of “a motion of the seminal passages in accordance with their filling up, and an impulse toward sexual intercourse, at which time a certain frenzy is born in the soul, and a lack of self-control and a desire for any chance encounter in matters of love, as well as the heat of passion, deceit, and the blindness of falling forward.”

The Sun rules the middle part of life, until age forty-one, during which period the person establishes its reputation and station in life, and learns to exercise mastery and authority. Life becomes harder in the next period of life, ruled by Mars, until age fifty-six. This is described as the period of manhood, when the person senses that their prime is passing by, and begins to encounter suffering of life, cares and vexations of soul and body. Old age commences after this, ruled by Jupiter until age sixty-eight. This is described as a period of transition, during which the person turns from their own toils and affairs to seek wisdom and prudence, and, hopefully, to be rewarded with honor and dignity. The final stage of old age is not attractive, ruled by Saturn until death, during which period the person begins to lose its faculties.

Looking more closely at Ptolemy's description of old age, we find that he characterizes the ages of Jupiter and Saturn as social opposites. This is in accordance with the judgment of the astrologers who view Jupiter as the “Greater Benefic” (the “Lesser Benefic” is Venus), a kind of rich uncle, and a source of good fortune. By contrast, Saturn is viewed as the “Greater Malefic” (the “Lesser Malefic” is Mars), and brings evil fortune and loss.³⁶ Let us see how he relates these opposing principles.

The two stages of old age are described by Ptolemy in these words, “Sixth, the star of Zeus (Jupiter), obtaining as its lot the elderly age, again for the twelve year term of its own period, makes [the native] turn away from activities involving his own labor and toil and tumult and risk, while it introduces instead those that are dignified and those involving foresight and retirement, and furthermore, above all those involving prudence and admonition and consolation, preparing him at that time to exert himself especially for honor and praise and independence, with modesty and dignity. Finally, the star of Kronos (Saturn) is allotted the last period, old age, for the length of life still remaining, with the motions of the body and of

³⁶ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, Book I, 5.

the soul now being cooled and impeded in their impulses, enjoyments, desires, and quickness, the natural decline coming upon a life that has become a skeleton, and which is dispirited and weak and easily offended and peevish toward everything, as is proper to the sluggishness of its movements."³⁷

The transition from the age of Jupiter to the age of Saturn can be seen to be more gradual than abrupt, and the turning point may be said to lie at that point in life when one loses the power of self-determination, and becomes subject to illness. Overall, Jupiter is claimed by astrologers to embody "wisdom, reason, honesty and good," whereas Saturn signifies "mourning, sorrow, weeping, lamentation, hardship and evil."³⁸ By comparison with the seasonal model, the division of life into seven stages is more complete, and true to life in its transitions, than the division of life into four seasons, yet both models may be criticized as generalizations. Clearly, different people will handle the stages of aging in different ways, and this becomes apparent when we see how medieval poets, represented by Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, Jean Froissart, Christine de Pizan, and Dante comment on the two stages of old age, ruled by Jupiter and Saturn respectively.

The Age of Jupiter

A sustained treatment according to the seven stage model is given by Jean Froissart, poet and observer of French and English courts, and a contemporary to Chaucer and Gower, in a "dit" entitled *Le Joli Buisson de Jeunesse* (The Sweet Bush of Youth), in which he imagines himself inspired by personifications of Nature, and Dame Philosophy, and, conducted by Venus, he revisits a past love before awakening to a sadder life in the present.³⁹ The poem is a sustained metaphor on the passing of life, and depicts the firmament as a bush with seven branches, to which are subject "hommes, femmes, oisiaus et bestes" (1581; men, women, birds and beasts), and the branches are described in turn as the planetary ages of man (lines 1554–707). Interestingly, Froissart presents a different age allocation to that found in the works of Ptolemy and Guido Bonatti, and brings in old age ten years

³⁷ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, Book IV, 44.

³⁸ Bonatti, *Liber Astronomiae*, Part III, Chapter VII.

³⁹ Jean Froissart, *Le Joli Buisson de Jeunesse*, ed. Anthime Fourier. Textes littéraires français, 222 (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1975), 104–05, my translation. For a modern French translation, without line numbers, see Marylène Possamai-Perez, *Le Joli Buisson de Jeunesse*. Traductions des Classiques Français du Moyen Âge (Paris: Editions Honoré Champion, 1995). See also the references to this work in Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 40–42, 52, 180.

earlier, after age forty-six (two years less than the onset of old age in Byrhtferth's seasonal diagram), when Jupiter takes over from Mars, as follows:

Puis vient Jupiter tout le cours,	
Qui a l'omme fet grant secours,	
Car d'outrages et de folies	1670
Et de pluseurs merancolies,	
Ou jadis il s'est embatus	
Et dont il a esté batus	
Tant par li com par l'autrui ire,	
Compains, vous poés moult bien dire	1675
Que la planette l'en delivre	
Et plus seür estat li livre,	
Qu'on doit prisier et honnourer,	
Car elle li fat savourer	
Pais de corps et repos pour l'ame,	1680
Ordener sepulture et lame,	
Amer l'Eglise et Dieu cremir,	
Recongnostre et de ce fremir	
Que chils mondes n'est q'uns trespas.	
Ceste planette ne lait pas	1685
L'omme, anchois l'estoie et yverne	
Et .XII. ans ou plus le gouverne.	

[Next comes Jupiter rapidly, who renders great assistance to man, from sins and wantonness and many false ideas into which formerly he is plunged, and by which he has been overthrown as greatly as by the violence of another, Friend, you can very well say that the planet frees him from them and bestows a more sure state, that one ought to value and honour, for it causes him to breathe in peace of body and rest for the soul, to prepare tomb and memorial, to love the Church and to fear God, to recognise, and on account of this to tremble, that these created things are no more than a flicker of time. This planet doesn't abandon man, but first governs him, summer and winter, for twelve years or more.]

This picture of Jupiter is true to its generalized reputation as the Greater Benefic, but it fails to take into account the possible abuses of good fortune, which receive greater attention by Gower and Chaucer. This variation in effect is recognized in astrological texts which stress that, among other matters, the effects of Jupiter depend on the sign through which the planet is passing in its twelve year circuit of the zodiac.⁴⁰ Accordingly, there were situations when Jupiter could be less fortunate, as comes through in Book VII of John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, in which he describes Jupiter in carefully qualified terms, "the sexte Planete of the sevene, / Stant Jupiter the delicat, / Which causeth pes and no debat... He schal be

⁴⁰ Bonatti, *Liber Astronomiae*, Part I, 58–70.

meke and pacient / And fortunat to Marchandie / And lusti to delicacie/ In every thing which he schal do" (CA, VII, 908–10, 916–19). The word "delicat" has a pejorative tone, lost in today's English, and indicates a tendency to self-indulgence, especially in sexual matters, confirmed by Chaucer in the poem, *The Former Age*, where he imagines that the world was innocent in the beginning because "Yit was not Jupiter the likerous (lecherous), / That first was fader of delicacye, / come in this world; ne Nembrot (Nimrod), desirous / To regne, had nat maad his toures hye" (56–59). To Gower and Chaucer, then, the negative aspects of Jupiter are found in yielding to the temptations brought on by an excess of material goods and the exercise of unrestrained power.

Further, these are the same negative traits displayed by Januarie in *The Merchant's Tale*, underlined by placing him as a knight of Lombardy, an area famed for "Marchandie" and for being ruled by carnal nature, as described by Gower; "Venus of love the goddesse / Is cleped: bot of wantounesse / The climat of hir lecherie / Is most comun in Lombardie" (CA, VII, 797–800). In short, the description of Januarie in *The Merchant's Tale* would come across, to an audience familiar with astrological symbolism, as an amusing example of the negative traits of the age of Jupiter, without any need to be more specific.

Yet it remains true to say that most poets associated good things with Jupiter. Christine de Pizan, in *Epistre Othea*, commences her exposition of the planetary spheres and properties with Jupiter, rather than Saturn, in order to stress the positive qualities that ought to be cultivated by a young knight. The outward qualities of Jupiter are prudence and a joyful face, with the allegorical lesson that, like Jesus Christ, the good knight should practice mercy and compassion.⁴¹ Similarly, Dante stresses the positive aspect of Jupiter when he is led by Beatrice through the sixth heaven, inhabited by the souls of the just, whose shining souls spell out the words *Diligite Iustitiam Qui Iudicatis Terram* (Love justice, you who judge the earth), exemplified by rulers from the past who have exercised their power for the good of all, set against the wars and corruption of contemporary rulers.⁴²

The Age of Saturn

Froissart's description of the age of Jupiter leads into a similarly stereotyped picture of the physical age governed by Saturn, as follows:

⁴¹ Jane Chance, *Christine de Pizan's Letter of Othea to Hector*, a translation based on Harley Ms. 4431 (1990; Rochester NY: Boydell and Brewer Inc., 1997), 44–45; see also Christine de Pizan, *Epistre Othea*, ed. Gabriella Parussa. *Textes littéraires français*, 517 (Genève: Droz, 1999), 211–13.

⁴² Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, Canto XVIII, 58 to Canto XX, 148.

Puis vient Saturnus li obscure,
 Qui de nul bien faire n'a cure
 Ne qui ne scet servir a gré, 1690
 Et regne ou septisme degré.
 Tant qu'a nous, c'est la plus lointaine.
 Elle est plus froide que fontaine.
 Moult sont doubtable et dur si meur.
 L'omme fet vivre en grant cremeur 1695
 Et jusques en le fin le mainne,
 Et tout ce que nature humaine
 Forge et oeuvre sans nul repos,
 Elle delivre a Atropos,
 Qui descire tout et deveure, 1700
 Sans regarder terme ne heure,
 Ne n'espargne roi ne bergier :
 Tout fait en terre herbergier
 Maugré Cloto et Lathesis.

[Then comes Saturn the sinister, who pays no attention to do anyone good, nor knows how to satisfy the wishes, and it reigns through the seventh step. As far as concerns us, it is the most distant. It is colder than water from a spring. Its manners are very fearsome and hard. It causes man to live in great fear and leads him as far as death, and all which human nature, without any rest, creates and fashions it despatches to Atropos, who destroys and devours everything without respect for season or hour, and spares neither king nor shepherd: it causes all to lodge in the earth, against Clotho and Lachesis.]⁴³

Once again, the depiction is one-sided, in accordance with Saturn's reputation as the Greater Malefic, whereas the astrological texts always stress that the quality of a planet is *not* constant, but varies through time according to the sign, and the house (counted from the Ascendant) through which it passes, and the angular relationships formed against other planets.⁴⁴ Chaucer follows the pessimistic view of Saturn, when Palamon in *The Knight's Tale*, like Boethius, questions the working of fate as he is held prisoner, while his cousin Arcite is free to woo Emelye, and answers his own question, "Fortune hath yeven us this adversitee. / Some wikke aspect or disposicioun / Of Saturne, by som constellacioun, / Haf yeven us this, although we hadde it sworn; / So stood the hevene whan that we were born" (1086–90). Similarly, Saturn is associated with the Fates in *The Legend of Good Women*, when Hypermnestrea is born a good and beautiful woman, through the joint influence of Venus and Jupiter (the Benefics) yet these cannot withstand the evil influence of Mars and Saturn (the Malefics) and she dies in prison (LGW,

⁴³ Atropos (the Inflexible), and her sisters, Clotho (the Spinner) and Lachesis (the Allotter), together make up the Moirae (Fates), or, in other words, one's allotted life span.

⁴⁴ Bonatti, *Liber Astronomiae*, Part III, 92–99.

2573–98). The one instance in Chaucer where another face can be given to Saturn occurs in his poem *The Former Age*, where an age of innocence is said to precede this age, in which injustice is attributed to Jupiter, but he passes up the chance to link thrift and hardiness specifically with Saturn.⁴⁵ Likewise, Gower, in *Confessio Amantis*, has nothing good to say about "Saturnus, whos complexion / Is cold, and his condicion / Causeth malice and cruelte / To him the whos nativite / Is set under his governance" (VII, 937–41).

Yet once again, we can see another side to Saturn in the writings of Christine de Pizan. She identifies Saturn with wisdom, moderation and gravity, because it revolves above all the other spheres, and she interprets the myth of the castration of Saturn by Jupiter as the stealing of the *positive* powers of Saturn.⁴⁶ She draws the allegorical interpretation that a good knight should be very sure before he passes judgment in any matter, because God alone knows the causes of all actions.⁴⁷ Dante likewise can see no evil in the sphere of Saturn, indeed he cannot see the faces of the souls in this sphere because their brilliance would consume him, and the legend of the Golden Age of peace once ruled by Saturn is alluded to in these words, "Dentro al cristallo che 'l vocabol porta, / cerchiando il mondo, del suo caro duce / sotto cui giacque ogne malizia morta, / di colore d'oro in che raggio traluce / vid' io uno scaleo eretto in suso / tanto, che nol seguiva la mia luce." (Within the crystal which bears the name, circling around the world, of its beloved leader beneath whom every wickedness lay dead, I saw, of the color of gold on which a sunbeam is shining, a ladder rising up so high that my sight might not follow it.)⁴⁸

The virtues of self-denial and austerity are held out by St. Peter Damian, the sole spokesman who shows himself to Dante in this sphere, saying, "Quivi / al servizio di Dio mi fe' sì fermo, / che pur con cibi di liquor d'ulivi / lievemente passava caldi e geli, / contento ne' pensier contemplativi." (There in the service of God I became so steadfast that with food seasoned only with olive juice I passed easily through heats and frosts, content in contemplative thoughts.)⁴⁹

Theologically, the apparent discrepancy between this model, which places Heaven on the outside, as it were, beyond the distant sphere of Saturn, compared to the seasonal model, where God is at the center, is resolved by Dante at the end when he realizes that the physical universe of the spheres becomes reversed when seen

⁴⁵ The association of Saturn with a frugal Golden Age, overthrown by the Silver Age of Jupiter, is seen in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3–6.

⁴⁶ For differing interpretations of Saturn, as fable, moral, natural, Neoplatonic or poetic/astrological, see Theresa Tinkle, "Saturn of the Several Faces: A Survey of the Medieval Mythographic Traditions," *Viator* 18 (1987): 289–307.

⁴⁷ Jane Chance, *Christine de Pizan's Letter of Othea to Hector*, 46–47.

⁴⁸ Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, Canto XXI, 25–30.

⁴⁹ Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, Canto XXI, 113–17.

from the spiritual viewpoint, as he looks back and sees, instead of the Earth, “un punto vidi che raggiava lume / acuto sì, che ‘l viso ch’elli affoca / chiuder conviensi per lo forte acume” (I saw a point which radiated a light so keen that the eye on which it blazes needs must close because of its great keenness).⁵⁰

In conclusion, the models of old age seen through the lens of the Ptolemaic universe were eminently practical. The four stage (seasonal) view of life is claimed by Burrow “to have provided the most powerful and the most influential of all older attempts to explain scientifically the changes which human beings go through in the course of their life.”⁵¹ Further, the seasonal model is confirmed by the Church calendar which places the birth of Christ in the depths of winter, as a light inserted at the time of greatest darkness, with the promise of Resurrection and eternal life three months later, at Easter. By contrast, the planetary model of old age is more philosophical and may be viewed in contradictory ways. The simplest view of old age, exemplified by Froissart, sees life as a progression from good to bad caused by declining personal powers and the inevitability of death. Against this, poets such as Gower and Chaucer question the attachment to possessions in old age and they are more concerned with *how* a person handles this stage of life, rather than the simple biology of age. Dante, in particular, questions the value systems of “Elde” which prefer the health and enjoyment of possessions and honor in old age (Jupiter), in preference to the stripping away of the self through poverty and suffering (Saturn), where the latter is, from the Christian perspective, the surest (and inevitable) path to the stars and Heaven.

⁵⁰ Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, Canto XXVIII, 16–18.

⁵¹ Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 12.

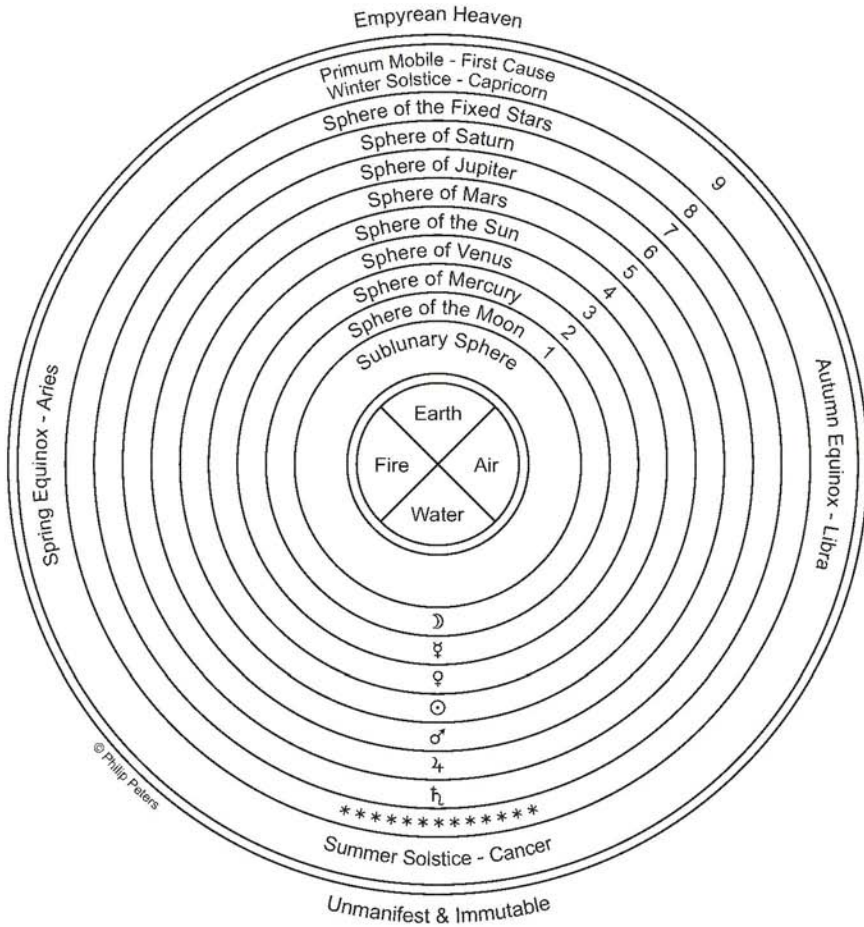


Fig. 1: Ptolemaic Universe

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Old Age, Narrative Form, and Epistemology in Langland's *Piers Plowman*: The Possibility of Learning

Ernest Hemingway's "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" presents us with a dialogue between a young bartender and an old bartender. In the course of their typically one-line dialogue format, the young bartender describes one of their regular customers, an old man, as "a nasty thing."¹ The young bartender cannot even stand to look at him directly. This twentieth-century image of aging, not unlike the stereotypical images of old age dating from the classical period, has alienation, loss of control, and senility at the forefront. But the struggles between youth and old age were a frequent topic of debate as well as the subject of comedy in medieval literature, especially when the older person was acting out of character with the aging process.

In the years immediately after the Black Death (1348–1349) and continuing throughout the late Middle Ages, European society was radically reshaped as a result of demographic changes. The social historian Georges Minois has noted that the plagues of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries seem to have impacted young adults and children in the greatest numbers, leaving large age gaps and a significantly larger aging population.² Thus it would be no surprise that the aged man or woman might become the subject of comedy at one moment or the pattern for behavioral norms for the transcendence from bodily limitations at another, as well as a range of positions between these two extremes.³ In her essay in this collection, Marilyn Sandidge contends that changing demographics with successive waves of new plagues in the last part of the fourteenth century had

¹ Ernest Hemingway, "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 379–83.

² Georges Minois, *History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. Sarah Hanbury Tenison (1989; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 210.

³ Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, trans. Yael Lotan (1995; London: Routledge, 1997), 36–59.

considerable impact on the fictions of Boccaccio and Chaucer. Readers of fourteenth-century English literature have only to think of *The Merchant's Tale* and *The Miller's Tale* of Geoffrey Chaucer to observe such comic juxtapositions of youth and age, often noted in wise sayings from the classical period as being in debate with each other. The images are both visually detailed and stereotypical, just as Anouk Janssen, in her contribution to this volume, notes with respect to fifteenth-century art from the Netherlands. A somewhat more transcendent view of old age is found in *The Parliament of the Thre Ages*. Here Elde, having passed through both periods, rebukes Youth's warring and amorous passions and Middle Ages's acquisitions of possessions. The portraits of the Nine Worthies are the basis for Elde's reflection on human transitions. Lisa Kiser comments, however, that the focus of Elde's confession of sin before his approaching death is the actual perspective of the poem.⁴ Images in the poem are very visual, and as Harry Peters's essay in this volume shows, iconography furthers that notion of presentation. Both Chaucer's image and the anonymous poet's image of old age are intertwined in the poem under investigation in this study: *Piers Plowman*.⁵

William Langland's treatment of old age in *Piers Plowman* has heretofore not been interpreted as remarkable, and in many cases has simply been overlooked by scholarship. This essay will demonstrate that Langland's treatment of old age is an important element in the educative and epistemological agenda of the poem.

Intellectual and cultural historians such as Mary Dove, Shulamith Shahar, and Joel T. Rosenthal have investigated the literary, material, and medical descriptions of the aging process in the Middle Ages.⁶ What is clear is that aging was also of great concern to medieval writers, philosophers, and medical experts, whether they were attempting to explain it, to avoid it, or to ridicule it in the way that Hemingway's young bartender did.⁷ Scott L. Taylor's essay in this volume shows that even medieval theologians such as Jean Gerson were concerned about this fragility in the aging process. The intriguing patterns uncovered by various

⁴ Lisa Kiser, "Elde and His Teachings in *The Parliament of the Thre Ages*," *Philological Quarterly* 66 (1987): 303–14.

⁵ William Langland, *Piers Plowman: The B Text*, edited George Kane and E. Talbot Donaldson (London: Athlone Press, 1988). All text references to the poem are to this edition.

⁶ Mary Dove, *The Perfect Age of Man's Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, trans. Yael Lotan (1995; London: Routledge, 1997); Joel T. Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England*, The New Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). All of these studies examine a range of texts and historical documents to develop their theses. For a survey of relevant research literature, see the "Introduction" to this volume by Albrecht Classen.

⁷ See the range of ideas and attitudes about old age discussed by Albrecht Classen in his "Introduction" to this volume. The highly complex discourse of old age continued far into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as the contribution to this volume by Allison P. Coudert indicates.

historians can help us to understand the representation of Old Age (Elde) and the effects on Will at the end of *Piers Plowman*, a personified figure often seen as comic, tragic, and pathetic all at once. Langland's image embodies the contradictory attitudes present in these various cultural manifestations.

Langland's *Piers Plowman* has long been recognized as a poem in which learning is central to narrative development, but the poem is actually in praxis more concerned with the deferral of learning, thus creating an open and recursive form. The development of an internal biographical/autobiographical image of Will seems to have been a preoccupation of Langland the poet, who presents at least three versions of his poem, typically labeled A, B, and C. Throughout the versions of the poem, the endeavor to separate William Langland the poet from Will the Dreamer becomes increasingly complex, but Will the Dreamer seems to make little progress in his learning, either intellectually or experientially, while the poet is able to "complete" his narrative.

At times, such as at the end of Passus 7 (B text), the Dreamer seems to reject his learning altogether as a block to salvation. Frustration with learning seems to have ended the A text version because it breaks off abruptly with a discussion of the worth of study and knowledge. Is learning possible? If it is, how does one intellectually know and feel? These are important questions with which both the poet and Will the Dreamer struggle throughout life, and these continue even into old age.

The message of Holy Church to Will in Passus 1 about learning to love is echoed in the words of Kynde (nature) in Passus 20, who tells Will that his necessary craft as he enters Unity or Unity Holy Church—the name that Langland gives to the Church—is to learn to love as a kind of revenge upon Old Age, with Death also seen in close proximity. Rejecting physical labor in earlier portions of the poem along with its virtues, Will is to embrace a labor of the spirit—one that will lead to transcendence as well as unity within the bodies politic and celestial.⁸ Near the end of the poem in both the B and C texts, Will the Dreamer is confronted with the figure of Old Age—sometimes regarded as a comic figure who bestows on Will the loss of hair and impotence. He comes after the culmination of diseases brought on by Kynde in an assault against those who threaten Holy Church. At the same time, having become the "victim" of Old Age, Will learns that more awaits him than an inevitable death. Unity Holy Church, itself deeply corrupted thus far in Langland's contemporary fourteenth century and subject to even greater sacramental corruption by the friars in the remaining passus lines of the poem, becomes the

⁸ James Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Interpretation of the B-Text* (London: Longman, 2001) 230–31. Simpson's reading is thus the poem's culmination of work beginning with the tearing of the pardon episode (Passus 7) and its aftermath.

safe harbor for Will—it becomes his place of medieval old age retirement.⁹ In this way, Langland has presented readers with a new image of old age and its possibilities, a new kind of discourse that more nearly links together words, deeds, and significant things.

For the purposes of this essay, discourse is defined according to its use by Timothy J. Reiss as “the visible and describable practice of what is called ‘thinking.’”¹⁰ Thinking structures this new discourse. Surely Langland would not abandon his character to a ruined institution for which there is no future; such an action would be unthinkable. Those possibilities in old age, promised by Kynde, also echo in the final lines of the poem where Conscience asks Kynde for the possibility of health—termed an “avenging” action until he finds Piers the Plowman. These notions are all tied to this new meaning that lies ahead and is enshrined in a new discourse.

From the time of Bloomfield’s landmark study of the poem, it has become traditional to read the ending as foreshadowing the end of human history—thus a poet’s version of a fourteenth-century apocalypse.¹¹ The avenging of old age and the quest for Piers suspend human time for some indefinite period. Studies of the poem have often pointed to Langland’s use of the traditional Ages of Man,¹² but Langland actually modifies these periods to allow even in the remaining moments of life a kind of new beginning, although its actual form remains shrouded of mystery.

Here I would like to argue that a re-investigation of the implications of Old Age for Will and learning will help us to understanding the ending of the poem from a different perspective. Will is learning how to learn in new ways, and we too as readers of the poem are “learning” not to read the ending as a harbinger of imminent destruction, but as the venue for new experiences, the opening of a new discourse. Will is not “a nasty thing,” but is filled with new possibilities.

⁹ Of course, this term is problematic. In most cases, there was no retirement as it is known in the modern world, but Jonathan Lyon’s contribution to this volume provides some important evidence of what medieval people would have understood when noblemen ‘retired.’

¹⁰ Timothy J. Reiss, *The Discourse of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 9.

¹¹ Morton Bloomfield, *Piers Plowman as a Fourteenth-Century Apocalypse* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1961). This study forms the basis for reading the poem in this way, and it has governed apocalyptic readings of the poem to date.

¹² J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

I

To understand old age and its representation as a backdrop for reading Will's confrontation with Elde, it is also necessary to contextualize aging within medieval notions of masculinity. Vern Bullough, Clare Lees, and Ruth Karras among others have provided us with some significant studies that show just how fragile and anxiety-ridden masculinity was in the medieval West.¹³ They stress the need to separate gendered experience, male and female, along with individual experiences among men. Michael Uebel notes that "The norm for medieval personhood was defined—needless to say—as masculine: femininity was constructed as imperfection, incompleteness, passivity, childishness, failure."¹⁴ The medieval body was characterized as a site of power for masculine creation.¹⁵ It was when the body was not productive, when bodily heat and moisture diminished, that the masculine body became problematic.¹⁶ If, as Vern Bullough observes, masculinity—in an essentialist sense—in the medieval West was characterized by "impregnating women, protecting dependents, and serving as a provider to one's family," there obviously comes a time when those elements shift to past tense performance.¹⁷ Various voices of debate about the role of sexual activity for the male bring into conflict classical age medicine and the authoritative voices of the Church. Did sexual activity prolong life, or did it shorten it and endanger the soul?¹⁸ Will the Dreamer himself is caught in this conundrum as he focuses on the materiality and corporeality of his body.

In the medieval mind-set, the body was both real and symbolic simultaneously. The status of Joseph as old man—always impotent and in many medieval artistic depictions noted as falling asleep at the Nativity—became the icon for the aging and wise consort, an elderly man who knew his place in a new world order

¹³ Vern Bullough, "On Being a Male in the Middle Ages," *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 31–45; *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); Ruth Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe*, The Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). See also *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler. The New Middle Ages, 4 (New York: Garland Publications, 1997). The entire volume contains essays that focus on this anxiety motif.

¹⁴ Michael Uebel, "On Becoming Male," *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, 370.

¹⁵ Uebel, "On Becoming Male," 371.

¹⁶ Deborah Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe, c. 1300–c. 1500*. Manchester Medieval Studies (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 188–85.

¹⁷ Bullough, "On Being a Male in the Middle Ages," 34.

¹⁸ Jacqueline Murray, "Hiding Behind the Universal Male: Male Sexuality in the Middle Ages," *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 123–52.

scheme. As Shahar has noted, both medical and philosophical texts were concerned with the representation of aging, mostly from the male perspective.¹⁹ There are several commonplace ideas that should be noted. Old age was typically associated with the acquiring of wisdom and with the decline of sexual appetite and even the requirement that masculinity be demonstrated in such an essentialist way. There were even suggestions in a late fourteenth-century text that old age could be “postponed” if the male did not “overindulge in sexual intercourse.”²⁰ The old man who was amorous was condemned, and, as we know, became the subject of comedy in the previously noted Chaucer’s Merchant’s and Miller’s tales. Old age was typically described in terms of a person who was “impatient, quick to anger, irritable, bored and boring, hostile to new customs, laughter and merriment.”²¹ Chaucer’s Reeve is an excellent, almost textbook example here. Roger Bacon similarly provides a classical external description of old age:

All these accidents of old age and senility are white hair, pallor, wrinkling of the skin, excess of mucus, foul phlegm, inflammation of the eyes, and general injury to the organs of sense, diminution of blood and of the spirits, weakness in motion and breathing and in the whole body, failure in both the animal and natural powers of the soul, sleeplessness, anger and disquietude of mind, and forgetfulness.²²

Old age could not be avoided, but it could certainly be postponed with the help of healthy living, if one began early in life or was provided with an elixir.²³ Bacon’s understanding of the aging process as well as those of other writers stressed the essentialist vision of the body—biology determines destiny. Old age could be at least postponed, but the state of the spirit was even more important. As the body was moving toward old age, the soul was to remain youthful.²⁴ Such a move toward youthfulness would be a curb against anger and bitterness. The Will of *Piers Plowman* cannot afford to be bitter.

Old age, according to Ranchin (*ca.* 1560–1641), who based his work on Galen, had age thirty-five as the start of a decline that would last for fifteen years and was then followed by a most drastic decline, including dementia and, of course, the loss of hair, teeth, and sexual function.²⁵ No wonder the notions of healthful living espoused by Bacon gained such ground as evidenced by the translation of his work on aging into the vernacular. Of course, many of these physical and mental

¹⁹ As the contributions to the volume by Karen Pratt and Gretchen Miezkowski indicate, the portrayal of old women tended to be highly misogynistic and pejorative throughout the entire Middle Ages.

²⁰ Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 162.

²¹ Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 169.

²² Roger Bacon, “Experimental Science,” *The Opus Majus of Roger Bacon*, trans. Robert Belle Burke (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1928), 2:619.

²³ Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 173.

²⁴ Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 180.

²⁵ Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England*, 98.

changes lead to a withdrawal from social life. Rosenthal documents such moves away from the public sector, and he has examined the retirement of fourteenth and fifteenth-century English coroners as an intriguing index to retirement based on the loss of physical strength. In city records of the late Middle Ages, there is evidence to show that seventy was the acceptable age for retirement from public duties, often connected with that loss of strength. Retirements in some ranks came with subsidies and other forms of care provided at churches and religious houses.²⁶ The notion of a golden years' period was probably far more rooted in Baconian philosophical speculation than reality, although medieval people were apparently aware that changes were not only probable but natural.²⁷ Juanita Feros Ruys, in her contribution to this collection of essays, also focuses in detail on that loss of physical strength, but from the vantage of the medieval Latin tradition. Langland seems to have his own vision of that "golden period" when the avenging Will enters Unity and begins to find the way to love. For Will, the controlling of sexual appetite becomes important as a transition point on the way to this "golden period." Clearly, Langland does not believe the clock of aging can be reversed, but the remedy of revenging in a metaphorical sense can be seen as a restorative to the ravages of aging, seen in the loss of desire and performance.

II

Throughout the versions of *Piers Plowman*, readers are presented with a complex vision of the poet and narrator/dreamer. In his recent study, David Benson has demonstrated just how difficult it can be to determine the "I" voice in the narrative.²⁸ Given that the "I" voice is the one beset by Elde, it is important to consider this ambiguity. Traditionally, scholarship has developed a sense of biography for the poet and the dreamer from some external, but mostly internal evidence (a C text addition). Internal evidence has traditionally been read so that the dreamer—the "I" voice as a single voice—gives a diminished and somewhat comic image of what William Langland must have been like. We, of course, recognize that much of this notion is built on the same paradigm of the Chaucer poet/Chaucer pilgrim dichotomy that has been instructive to a whole generation

²⁶ Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England*, 108; Youngs, *The Life Cycle in Western Europe, c. 1300–c. 1500*, 176–82.

²⁷ *Sex, Aging, and Death in a Medieval Medical Compendium: Trinity College Cambridge MS R.14.52, Its Texts, Language, and Scribe*, ed. M. Teresa Tavormina. *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies*, 292 (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2006). Tavormina notes that many associated Bacon's ideas with occult practices (138–41).

²⁸ David Benson, *Public Piers Plowman: Modern Scholarship and Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

of Chaucer scholarship. The Dreamer identified as "I" appears more frequently as a character in the poem in the *Visio* and less so in the *Vita*. While there seems to be some sense of chronological growth and change on the part of that "I" voiced narrator whom we call "Will," the biography of the "I" is by no means thoroughly drawn out. Such observations have lead David Benson to contend that "The function of the various traits given to the 'I' in *Piers Plowman* often seems less biographical than literary or thematic frequently with local effect."²⁹ The intention seems related to a particular moment in the text. Further Benson notes that

At the end of the poem, the narratorial 'I,' who has been largely absent in this section, suddenly presents himself as one who has become bald, deaf, toothless, and impotent (B 20. 183–98; C 22. 183–98). This is too much like a standard catalogue of all the frailties to which aged male flesh is heir to be taken as a reliable medical diagnosis of the poet's individual infirmities The poet's skill creates striking scenes, yet their relationship to his own life is unknowable and not apparently the narrative point.³⁰

It is Benson's last observation here about the narrative point that requires further examination. Langland is creating a fictive commentary upon the human estate, both personal and corporate. Will becomes his instrument.

From the founding of the Church in Passus 19 to the attack of Antichrist on the followers of Christ in Passus 20—moving human history some fourteen centuries in a few short lines—Langland provides us with one of the poem's most personal moments related to the essential nature of Will. The personal experiences of Will come as a result of the continuing war for the control of Unity and Christ's followers, both of which are besieged by the forces of Antichrist with increasing intensity and subtlety. Typical of the Langlandian poetics, which often calls contradictory and ambiguous forces such as Hunger into the scene to reactivate the workers on Piers's half acre, Elde is summoned to break the growing forces of oppression. The results in each case are both positive and negative, but are implicit to push the poem toward its conclusion. The entrance of Elde into the scene signals the departure of Lyf and the end of traditional medicine's ability to continue life in its present state—some new medicine is needed (an elixir). Elde turns his very physical attack against Will. The first attack is against Will's hair, which is lost. Medieval readers would likely have known that hair and sexual abilities—even sexual desire—were referenced in this loss.³¹

Hair was an outward manifestation of sexual prowess, and its loss to Will is more than the covering of his head. It signals the loss of masculinity, and that loss would have very public manifestations for all to see. Will rebukes Elde for not

²⁹ Benson, *Public Piers Plowman*, 85.

³⁰ Benson, *Public Piers Plowman*, 85–86.

³¹ Joan Cadden, *Meaning of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science, and Culture*. Cambridge History of Medicine (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 181–82.

asking permission to remove his hair, which is simultaneously comic and prophetic of change. The progression of deafness, the loss of teeth, and the development of gout show the rapid advance of age in Will's case. Gout was indeed a frequent marker of the progression of old age. Ramsa Lazla's essay in this collection comments upon this *motif* in connection with Wolfram von Eschenbach's early thirteenth-century work (*Parzival* and *Titarel*). Will seems to be caught in a time spiral toward his own end.

The most significant loss, however, garners more extended treatment in the narrative and should be seen as a manifestation of growing losses:

And of þe wo þat I was Inne my wif hadde ruþe
 And wisshed ful witterly þat I were in heuene.
 For þe lyme þat she loued me fore and leef was to feele
 On nyghtes namely, whan we naked weere,
 I ne myghte in no mannere make it at hir wille,
 So Elde and [heo] hadden it forbeten. (B.20.193–98)

William Rogers and Theresa Tavormina see in this brief scene of Will and Kit's private life an important moment betokening kindly intimacy remembered in the past.³² The tone, however, seems more pointed and less one of marital bliss. In reference to this passage, Stephen Barney notes that "Langland has the cleric's frankness, not the courtier's delicacy."³³ With the exception of a reference in B. 11 about Will's pursuit of women for 45 years,³⁴ this is the only other reference to sexual activity. That the reference to sexual impotence and decreased performance occurs at this point seems highly significant.

The passage relating to Will's impotence needs more extended analysis. Implicit in these brief lines is a history of male anxiety about impotence along with notions of female sexuality. Impotence, thought to be primarily a private issue today, was in the medieval world a very public matter. If detected and proved, impotence could lead to marital annulment,³⁵ not to mention public embarrassment. Here Will is, on one level, the victim of Nature, with the departure of warmth and moisture from the body—those elements which Bacon's science of healthy living would restore. On another level, both he and Kit are victims. On a third level, the role of Kit, his wife, is more intriguing. If medieval sexuality is male-centered, it was women who were responsible for sexual temptation. Women were thought to be

³² William Rogers, *Interpretation in Piers Plowman* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 261–62; Theresa Tavormina, *Kindly Similitude: Marriage and Family in Piers Plowman* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), 210.

³³ Stephen A. Barney, *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 5:220.

³⁴ Benson, *Public Piers Plowman*, 85.

³⁵ Murray, "Hiding Behind the Universal Man," 139.

more sexual by nature, and according to Shahr, the sexually desirous older woman was not a comic figure as her male counterpart, but almost disquieting. In fact, it was commonly believed that women could cause male impotence—an issue that saw greatest prominence in charges of witchcraft.³⁶ Kit here, along with Nature, is the embodiment of unbridled sexual desire; and that desire is not a productive one on several levels. If medieval sexuality is about procreation, then clearly here we have an unproductive sexuality. We have libidinous desire that foregrounds the medieval body in its stark materiality. Kit is seen as keeping Will focused on his body and its lack of performance. The statement that Kit “wisshed wel witterly þat I were in heuene” (20.194) is a comic line rooted in antifeminist satire of female desire unfulfilled which obviously recoils on the speaker. Kit ties his unproductive body to this world while medieval theologians would have urged him to focus on the next life. Will has through several means worn his body down through overuse.

It is also possible here that the poet/dreamer is picking up on the notion that an over-indulgence in sexual activity brings on old age prematurely. Along with these same notions were ones that refraining from such overindulgence would prolong life.³⁷ James J. Paxson, using queer theory, reveals additional possibilities. Noting Elde’s male status and considering the notion that excessive sexual activity for pleasure was sodomitical, Paxson concludes “the syntactical consolidating of Elde, Will, and Kit makes them into a trio of sodomists.”³⁸ If his reading here is correct and not just a matter of poetic phrasing and the consequence of grammar, the move into Unity Holy Church through penance becomes even more significant. Will, rooted in sin, needs the Church now more than ever.

In the midst of great physical loss, Will cries for aid to Kynde, a figure whose nature is doubled and ambiguous too: creator and destroyer. Moving into Unity Holy Church, according to Kynde, will allow the “I” narrator to have a kind of revenge upon Old Age. He must, however, heed the stipulation that he learn to love. How does such an activity work? Hugh White contends that the reference is to “the resurrection of the faithful soul to the bliss of heaven.”³⁹ Faithful love will then provide him with the goods that he needs now in his state of old age. Good Deeds will thus accompany Everyman Will into the next life.

³⁶ Murray, “Hiding Behind the Universal Man,” 139–42.

³⁷ Shahr, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages*, 162.

³⁸ James J. Paxson, “Inventing the Subject and Personification of Will in *Piers Plowman*: Rhetorical, Erotic, and Ideological Origins and Limits in Langland’s Allegorical Poetics,” *William Langland’s Piers Plowman: a Book of Essays*, ed. Kathleen M. Hewitt-Smith. Garland Medieval Casebooks, 30 (New York: Routledge, 2001), 195–231.

³⁹ Hugh White, *Nature and Salvation in Piers Plowman* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1988), 81.

III

There are, however, other alternatives to the meaning of avenging that are worth considering as uniquely Langlandian additions to the ideology of old age, death, and the end of human history. The medieval practice of giving one's goods to a religious community and moving into a religious house or hospital so that a person in declining health could be taken care of was a commonly known practice in the late Middle Ages. Will is moving into a physical space, a barn called Unity. In this context then, the community of faith was a stay against coming chaos and human deterioration, not just an apocalyptic end of the world. Hardly is this entrance a "rage against the dying of the light" as the speaker in Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night" recommends, but it is certainly intended to slow the progress of time. Death is no longer standing nearby as he was earlier. My reading now brings together several seemingly disparate portions of the poem that we have previously held in relief.

It is important to keep in mind that the "I" narrator is here very much awake, but that in the last line of the poem the "I" narrator awakens with the cry of Conscience for Grace in his search for Piers the Plowman. We now have to pose the following question: "is the ending 'I' narrator the age-ravaged 'I' narrator of the same passus or is this 'I' another one"? Assuming here that Langland has not become confused and that there is a good reason for this seemingly hermeneutic problem, we can hazard our own reading.

Given that a great deal of medieval literature focuses on the warnings of old age and the preference for youth, we may have here a warning against old age and a prescription for how to avoid it or at least postpone its consequences. The "I" narrator is not interested in presenting the image of the wise old man, but the foolish one who has spent his body. Such activity has wasted both outward manifestations of health and more private aspects of pleasure. The dreamer who awakens seems not to be burdened down by the last stages of life—at least from what the single last line tells us. Reading backwards then, it would seem that the first "I" narrator is one of Benson's examples of the use of such a voice for "thematic purposes." He becomes an image for exploration of what life might be, could be, and probably will be like.

But the end is postponed for the "I" narrator who awakens; he has perhaps only seen an image of himself—or perhaps a more generalized loss of the faculty of will—and he, at the end, draws back from that image. Learning still remains possible for both "I" narrators. The old age "I" narrator can still learn the craft of love, according to Kynde, the same figure from whom Conscience requests "hap and heele" (B 20. 385) until he finds Piers. In each case, Kynde provides some answers in what looks like an inevitable situation, but we should not read the situation as entirely futile. The challenge for both "I" narrators involves unchecked

desire. For the old "I" narrator, it is the unchecked sexual desire that has aged him. For the "I" narrator at the end of the poem, the problem is external—the unchecked desire of the friars for goods. Just as the old "I" narrator will be revenged on old age by entering Unity, so Conscience ask Kynde to avenge him in his pursuits. Whatever it does mean, avenging is a clear assertion of the will. Rather than a kind of coming doom, there is great faith placed in Piers Plowman and his ability to amend the problems of the friars. That avenging "will" becomes a central component in the new discourse that surfaces in the last passus of the poem.

Barring the interpretation that "In reality the unity envisioned in theocentric theory has been destroyed in every aspect,"⁴⁰ and that the poem does little more than fall apart, an interpretation related to a colonial/postcolonial vision should be considered that will help us to contextualize Will's entrance into the Church and the looming apocalyptic vision. In one of his early studies of the poem, David Aers's contention that Conscience's departure from Unity signals his rejection of orthodoxy seems rather hasty generalization.⁴¹ In a later study, Aers notes, "The poem's representations of the Church are certainly antithetical to any triumphalist narratives of the Church, medieval or contemporary. But then Langland would encourage us to see such triumphal models as among the opiates available to the Church, ones inducing an enchanting *amnesia*."⁴² The "I" narrator—whoever he might be—has prospects of Piers's return and the warnings against old age. Much remains to be learned; much remains to be accomplished.

Drawing distinctions seems important here as we re-imagine new spaces and a new discourse to image life in this waiting space for Will, the "I" narrator. In his essay "How Newness Enters the World" in *The Location of Cultures*, Homi Bhabha writes that "As a category, community enables a division between the private and the public, the civil and the familial; but as a performative discourse it enables the possibility of drawing an objective line between the two."⁴³ Thus while it would appear that there is some sense of abandonment of community at the end of the poem, there is actually the potential for a new community—one based on an "avenging Will," one based on the work of Piers, and one that only Piers can bring about. Piers becomes the focal point for a new community—one not based on nation, race, or time. Will, the "I" narrator, must learn that discourse of the new

⁴⁰ David Mills, "The Role of the Dreamer in *Piers Plowman*," *Piers Plowman: Critical Approaches*, ed. S.S. Hussey (London: Methuen, 1969), 180–212.

⁴¹ David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 79–80.

⁴² David Aers, "Visionary Eschatology: *Piers Plowman*," *Modern Theology* 16.1(2000): 3–17.

⁴³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2004), 230.

community, the language and thought processes of Unity, not the one of Holy Church in Passus 1.

That earlier discourse of Holy Church in Passus 1 seems primarily intellectual; here in Passus 20, Will must have a new way of seeing, feeling, and participating in the world in a less abstract and certainly more personal sense. This Will in his old age must learn to think, feel, and act, but it seems that this learning is possible only in old age.

The ending of *Piers Plowman*, identical in the B and C texts, provides some interesting epistemological challenges for Will, Conscience, and a host of other personifications. If James Simpson is correct that Will is actually the corporate body of the country England, the poem obviously takes on a national tone.⁴⁴ If the present reading of the role of Old Age and its implications for Will is correct, then learning is still possible, *even* in the midst of apparent sacramental problems. The ravages of age can be postponed through recourse to the natural order of things and through faith. Of course, the poet is not clear what is going to happen next, but health and wholeness seem to be keys for what is necessary in bringing about that future to which the poem moves: Will being enshrined in the church and Piers providing correction of the friars. Will, Kynde, and Conscience hold important keys to understanding this new life. Elde provides the opportunity for transcendence; the quest for Piers also provides for transcendence. Both the quest within and outside the body of the Church are epistemologically focused. By definition, *Piers Plowman* presents the world through institutional lenses that privilege traditional views of Church, state, and human nature. Will, Conscience, Kynde, and Piers transcend those narrow institutional forms. A new narrative discourse is being born, which is predicated on the advantages of old age. Perhaps readers along with the "I" narrator, warned of the potential ravages of old age, will simply have to be patient until Piers returns to realize fully that new discourse of the craft of love—if he ever does return!

⁴⁴ Simpson, *Piers Plowman: An Interpretation of the B-Text*, 124.

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“L’aage plus fort ennaye”: *Scientia mortis, Ars moriendi*
and Jean Gerson’s Advice to an Old Man

The purpose of this paper is to examine old age from the late medieval pastoral perspective, particularly that of the prominent Parisian Chancellor, Jean Gerson (1363–1429). Known both for his advocacy of church reform and his leading role at the Council of Constance (1414–1418), following which, having secured the condemnation of Jean Petit, he was forced into exile by the Burgundian ascendancy, he was at the same time a proponent of the *vita contempliva* for which vocation he expressed a marked preference throughout his life, authoring inter alia his important *De mystica theologia*. Nonetheless, while maintaining that all churchmen, indeed, all Christians, could benefit from contemplative pursuits, he emphasized that not all are so called as to their principal vocation. Those who ignore their responsibilities, especially the care of souls, in search of contemplation deceive themselves. Rather, for the majority of the faithful, what is demanded is an “ambidexterity,” balancing contemplative exercise and temporal obligation. For this reason, Gerson authored numerous tracts and letters for the guidance of those ministering to the flock of Christ. Surely, in the writings of Gerson, who dedicated himself as much as any figure of his age to promoting the pastoral function, we might expect to find counsel on the peculiar problems and temptations of senectitude.

But while the Chancellor’s voluminous writings contain much direction of benefit to the elderly, it is difficult to distinguish what advice if any pertains to old age per se. Perhaps this should not be surprising since, as might be presumed, much of the spiritual significance of old age in Christianity arises from its proximity to eternity, or phrased more bluntly in temporal terms, death. In reading Gerson’s pastoral works, it is necessary to ask which, if any, of his admonitions apply uniquely to senescence or senectitude. After all, from a formalistically penitential perspective, dying is dying. For old age to represent a meaningful category or periodization spiritually, it must be distinguishable from dying in general. Yet a number of prominent historians have asserted that while a dichotomy exists between medieval attitudes toward death on one hand, and

those of the early modern period on the other, in neither epoch does old age hold any place of distinction, either as a culmination of life or as a prelude to demise.

More specifically, Philippe Ariès, in his influential work, *The Hour of Our Death*, contended that as reflected by prevalent attitudes on death, the Middle Ages, or at least the late Middle Ages, were materialistic, the *Frühneuzeit*, spiritual.¹ Prime evidence adduced for this counter-intuitive proposition was the late medieval genre of literature known as the *artes moriendi* that evolved in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and which was designed particularly, albeit not exclusively, to advise the laity on how to die well. The development of the *artes* seems to have been spurred by the currency of Gerson's own pastoral handbook, *Opusculum tripartitum* (1400–1403), intended to instruct the clergy and laity engaged in Christian service on the Ten Commandments, confession, and assisting the dying.² The subsequent treatises on how to die, frequently entitled *Speculum artis bene moriendi*, incorporated much from Gerson's final section, entitled *Scientia mortis*, but were more specifically addressed to the clergy as theoretical compendia with extensive citation of patristic and classical philosophic sources.³ The popular form of the *Ars moriendi* was founded on these older tracts, abridged for use by the laity as "self-help" books, with an expanded discussion of the diabolic temptations

¹ *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (Oxford: Oxford University, 1991), originally published as *L'Homme devant la mort* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977). Translation originally published in New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981.

² The work was undoubtedly composed in Latin and then translated by Gerson himself into French to expand its audience. Subsequently, Gerson improved the Latin version. See Gilbert Ouy, *Gerson bilingue. Les deux rédactions, latine et française, de quelques oeuvres du chancelier parisien* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998). Indeed, the French clerical hierarchy directed the pastorate to deliver this work orally to their congregations according to the Monitum included in the DuPin edition of the *Opera omnia* (Antwerp, 1706; rpt., Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1987), Vol. 1, c. 427: "Hoc opus tanti fecere Gallicani Episcopi, ut Synodis suis ipsum elegerint ad institutionem tum Presbyterorum tum fidelium, legendum populo a Pastoribus praescripterint, et libris suis Ritualibus inseruerint." [The French bishops so esteemed this work that their synod prescribed it for the education of both the clergy and the laity, and mandated that it be read to the people by pastors, and that it be appended to their liturgical manuals.] The Latin text of the *Opusculum* appears in ca. 425–50. The French text appears in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Mgr. Glorieux, 10 vols. (Paris: Desclée, 1960–73), 7:404–07. Dick Akerboom has noted that the bishop of Liège issued similar decrees after Gerson's *Opusculum* appeared in a Dutch translation of 1512. "... Only the Image of Christ in Us' Continuity and Discontinuity between the Late Medieval *ars moriendi* and Luther's Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben," *Spirituality Renewed: Studies on Significant Representatives of the Modern Devotion*, ed. Hein Blommestijn, Charles Caspters and Rijklof Hofman (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 209–72, 216, note 20; cf. *Een scone leeringe om salich te sterven. Een Middelnederlandse ars moriendi*, ed. B. de Geus, J. van der Heijden, A. Maat and D. den Ouden (Utrecht: HES, 1985), 15–16.

³ See, e.g., Rainer Rudolf, *Der Verfasser des Speculum artis bene moriendi*. Anzeiger der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaft. Philosophisch-historische Klasse, 24 (Vienna: Rohrer, 1951); Thomas Peuntners "Kunst des Heilsamen Sterben" nach den Handschriften der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek untersucht und herausgegeben von Rainer Rudolf. Texte des späten Mittelalters, 2 (Berlin: E. Schmidt, 1956); Dick Akerboom, "... Only the Image," 216–17.

to be faced at death and illustrated by a series of eleven woodcuts demonstrating the appropriate responses to the five deathbed temptations of infidelity, despondence, vainglory, impatience and avarice.⁴ In the context of the *artes moriendi*, vainglory particularly refers to spiritual self-satisfaction, including pride in overcoming Satan's tests of faith and hope; while avarice subsumes any temporal bonds, whether family, friends, business affairs, and includes concern for worldly responsibilities as well as carnal pleasures.⁵ In short, any form of spiritual over-confidence or smugness is vainglory; and anything detracting from the penitent's recognition of his pilgrim status in the present world, being as a Christian a denizen of heaven, is *avaritia*.

Ariès, relying heavily on the work of Alberto Tenenti some two decades earlier,⁶ interpreted these texts as emphasizing the temptation of the solitary *moriens* with the subjects of temporal *avaritia* at a moment of death that inevitably provided due warning of impending demise, whether one lingered briefly after wounds suffered in battle, endured infirmity from illness or old age, or simply fell from one's horse. This "old" art of dying he contrasted with the "new art of dying" typified by Jean de Vauzelles, St. Ignatius Loyola, the Huguenot leader Duplessis-Mornay, and other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers who emphasized in their

⁴ Approximately twenty percent of surviving blockbooks are copies of the *Ars moriendi*. Akerboom, "... Only the Image," 221; Wilhelm Ludwig Schreiber, *Handbuch der Holz- und Metallschnitte*, 3rd ed., 10 Vols. (1891–1911; 1926–30; Nendeln: Kraus Reprint, 1969), 9:253–313. See also Sister Mary Catharine O'Connor, *The Art of Dying Well: The Development of the Ars Moriendi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 113–33. Most frequently reproduced have been representatives of the Rhineland group, which includes copies in Paris (B. N., Res. Xyl. 21), reproduced in Alberto Tenenti, *La vie et la mort à travers l'art du XVe siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1952), and in the British Museum, reproduced in *The Ars moriendi (editio princeps), circa 1450. A Reproduction of the Copy in the British Museum*, ed. W. Harry Rylands. With an introd. by George Bullen. Holbein Society's Facsimile Reprints, 14 (London: Wyman, for Holbein Society, 1881), also reproduced with notes in Akerboom, "... Only the Image," 250–272. Vernacular versions include the German, in Florence Bayard, *L'art du bien mourir au XVe siècle. Étude sur les arts du bien mourir au bas moyen âge à la lumière d'un Ars moriendi allemand du XVe siècle* (Paris: Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1999) and the French, Henri Zerner "L'art au morier," *La Revue de l'art* 11 (1971): 7–30.

⁵ "Quarto dyabolus temptat hominem infirmum per sui ipsius complacenciam que est superbia spiritualis per quam devotis et religiosus atque perfectis magis est infestus..." [Fourth, the devil tests the infirm man through his own self-satisfaction which is spiritual haughtiness that besets more greatly devotees, ascetics and the spiritually accomplished...] and "Quinta temptatio dyaboli est avaricia, magis seculares et carnales infestans, que est nimia occupacio temporalium atque exteriorum circa uxores et amicos carnales seu corporales divicias atque alia que magis in vita sua dilixerunt, per que dyabolus hominem maxime vexat in fine..." [The fifth temptation of the devil is avarice, endangering more those who are worldly and carnal, and which is too great a concern for the worldly and the outward in respect to spouses and carnal friends or material wealth and other things which greatly delighted them during life, through which the devil most torments man at the end...] Fol. XVIr and XXr, respectively, of the *editio princeps*.

⁶ Tenenti, *La vie et la mort*; and id., *Il senso della morte e l'amore della vita nel Rinascimento*. Studi e ricerche, 5 (Turin: Einaudi, 1957).

spiritual exercises the importance for the living to engage in life-long meditation on death, many of whom specifically denied any significance to senectitude, since according to them, the elderly think only of living.⁷ From this supposed dichotomy in death's contemplation, Ariès surmised that medieval folk manifested a greater love of life, i.e., the material world, than the early modern, and hence procrastinated in preparation for their demise while alive and well, and clung more tenaciously to temporal blessing at death.⁸

While Ariès's recognition of the important synergies between attitudes toward life and those toward death is admirable, among the manifest problems with his argument is the fact that life-long meditations were not a product of the early-modern period but already a commonplace of the *Devotio Moderna*, and outlined as a spiritual exercise in such widely distributed works of the late-fourteenth century as *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* of Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen,⁹ and this, in turn, can be traced back to the admonitions attributed to Anthony by Athanasius, to daily contemplate our own deaths.¹⁰ Moreover, the *artes moriendi* can be traced to the pseudo-Anselmic *Admonitio morienti et de peccatis nimium formidant*,¹¹ and while their realization as a distinctive genre date to the late Middle Ages, that genre persisted into the early modern period, not only in Roman Catholic areas, where it maintained popularity throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but even in Protestant areas, where Luther himself penned *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben* on the model of the *Artes*.¹²

Despite these manifest continuities, Ariès's assertion of the distinctively individual character of late medieval death has maintained currency among scholars, who like art historian Paul Binski, advance the notion that a, if not the, central preoccupation in the late medieval *artes moriendi* was the solitary character of death.¹³ Indeed, even Brian McGuire, influenced by these modern appraisals of the *artes moriendi* and late medieval literature and representation of death, discussing Jean Gerson's *Scientia mortis*, concedes somewhat reluctantly in his

⁷ See, generally, Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, Ch. 6.

⁸ In fact, Ariès goes further, noting that some *ars moriendi* included advice literature such as William Caxton's 1490 *Arte and crafte to knowe well to dye*, reprinted in facsimile (London: assigns of E. Lumley, 1875), which lists texts concerning manner and accomplishments such as conversation or chess. As Paul Binski notes in *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (New York: Cornell, 1996), 39: "This association has led some commentators such as Philippe Ariès to link the late medieval culture of death with a subtext of hedonism."

⁹ Gerardi a Zutphania, *De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, ed. Jerome Majieu (Bruges: K. Beyaert, 1941).

¹⁰ J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus*, series Latina (PL) (Paris, 1844–1855), vol. 73, *Vitae patrum* 15.

¹¹ PL 158: 685–88.

¹² D. Martin *Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–): 2:685–97. See the interesting discussion of this sermon in Dick Akerboom, "... Only the Image."

¹³ *Medieval Death*, 39–42.

biography of the Chancellor: "Gerson's message can be interpreted as one of an isolated individual who abandons all hope and bonds with other people and turns to God alone."¹⁴

But should Gerson be so read, and if not, what does it imply for a proper reading not only of his *Scientia mortis*, but of the late medieval art of dying in particular, and late medieval life and certainly old age, in general?

In this regard, I think it is unreasonable to interpret Gerson's *Scientia mortis* without reference to the Chancellor's own epistle of pastoral advice to an old man, now believed to be the famous writer, Philippe de Mézières, on how to conduct himself in his advanced years, written around 1402 and with which letter he enclosed a copy of this third part of the *Opusculum tripartitum*.¹⁵ After all, the fact that Gerson specifically provided the treatise to the recipient of his epistle suggests that Gerson recognized its value as a work of "self-help," consistent with the balance of his recommendations.

The letter opens with an hortation encouraging Philippe to persevere to the end, urging him: "Si ne failles point a ce trait car le peril et la perte y seroit sans remede." [Do not faint at this juncture, for the loss and ruin would be without remedy.] At first glimpse, this exhortation may seem consistent with Ariès's view of a medieval death characterized by warning—here the warning of old age, and by a quasi-judicial ordeal, a failure which spells the eternal doom of the *Moriens*. I would submit, however, that both the historical circumstances of the correspondence and the remainder of Gerson's counsel belie such an interpretation.

First, while the Chancellor refers to Philippe as "going to his end," history reveals that de Mézières was in no way *in extremis*, not even in particularly poor health given his advanced years. While often complaining of his senectitude, his writings indicate that he had been lamenting senescence for years. At this point of his career, it seems Philippe at most was withdrawing from active life, though he remained an advisor to the throne and was named an executor of Louis d'Orléans's will as late as 1403. Indeed, he would live at least another year and a half after Gerson's epistle.¹⁶

¹⁴ Brian Patrick McGuire, *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 347.

¹⁵ The letter appears as No. 19 in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Mgr. Glorieux, *L'Oeuvre Epistolaire*, 2:76–77. An earlier version appeared in M. Glorieux's "Comment Gerson préparait son père à la mort," *Mélanges de science religieuse* 14 (1957): 63–70.

¹⁶ "Active" is used advisedly. Philippe had formally quit the court after the death of Charles V in 1380, and retired to the monastery of the Cîteaux de Paris, where he found a refuge for the remainder of his life, without taking the habit. See generally Nicolas Jorga, *Philippe de Mézières, 1327–1405, et la croisade au XIV^e siècle*, Bibliothèque de l'École des hautes études, fasc. 110, 1896; London: Variorum, 1973); Max Lieberman, "Chronologie Gersonienne, IX: Jean Gerson et Philippe de Mézières" *Romania*

Hence, when Gerson proposes to provide all the advice necessary and proper to conduct Philippe's end, noting "la quele est plus fort ennaye par lenemy que autre aage et plus soubtinement," the Chancellor envisions not de Mézières's impending demise, but a presumably self-imposed seclusion affording the old writer opportunity to spiritually prepare for the inevitable.¹⁷ If, indeed, old age is "la quele plus fort ennaye," there must be something that distinguishes this phase of life from dying in general. McGuire translates this passage as "This age is more burdened than any other by the enemy, and with greater deception;" and then proceeding to introduce a full stop, he begins a new paragraph.¹⁸ While the result is not entirely inconsistent with the text, it does arguably obscure Gerson's meaning at this critical juncture.

First, "ennaier" is not a variant of "ennuyer," to burden. Max Lieberman, in his *Chronologie Gersonienne*,¹⁹ suggested an alternative transcription of "envayer," to attack, which is certainly more vivid than "to burden." I would submit however, that Glorieux's transcription is correct, and the passive participle intended by Gerson was "ennaye." "Ennaier" is an old French word, used at least from the beginning of the thirteenth century to mean bunged or caulked, as in "the cask is bunged."²⁰ It was also employed in a metaphorical sense. For example, the Renclus de Moiliens in his *Miserere*, a work of late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century social criticism, proclaims, "Desnaie toi, hom ennayes" — [Pour yourselves out, you stopped up men].²¹ This reading of the *Miserere* seems to relate to the subsequent lines indicating that there are two things that displease God — the good works that one leaves abandoned, and the evil deeds that one does.²² An alternative reading

81 (1960): 338–79. For some comparisons with twelfth-century cases, see Jonathan Lyon's contribution to this volume.

¹⁷ True, Gerson does state "Car vous tranyes a vostre fin" [For you are going to your end], and further: "on jugeroit un homme qui va mourir estre comme fol sil parloit lors par la voye et enquerroit dautrui besonges" [One would judge a man who goes to die to be a fool should he then speak throughout the trip and inquire as to the needs of others]. But it is significant that Gerson never refers to Philippe as "dying" — only as "going for to die," or, as Lieberman phrases it, "preparation à la mort."

¹⁸ *Jean Gerson: Early Works*, ed. Brian Patrick McGuire Classics of Western Spirituality 92 (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 225–27, at 225.

¹⁹ "Chronologie Gersonienne" 339–40.

²⁰ Cf. [Paul Meyer], "Periodiques," *Romania* 8 (1887): 630–31; see generally, *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch*, eds. Adolf Toblers and Erhard Lommatzsch (Stuttgart: F. Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1925 [i.e. 1915]–<1989>, "naiier," 6:483; Frédéric Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française*, 10 vols. (Paris: F. Vieweg, 1881–1902), "ennaier," 3:206.

²¹ *Li Romans de carite et miserere du Renclus de Moiliens: Poèmes de la fin du XIIe siècle*, ed. A.G. Van Hamel, 2 vol. (Paris: F. Vieweg 1885; rpt. Geneva: Slatkine, 1974), stanza 232, 2:261–62.

²² "De dous coses a Dieu desplais. / L'une est des biens ke as laïes, / L'autre est des maus ke tu as fais." [Concerning two things has God displeasure. / The first is the good you have abandoned, / The other is the evil you have done.] Stanza 233.

from different manuscripts, however, renders the foregoing line, "Renaie toi, hom desnaies!" — "Restrain yourselves, you libertines!"²³ In fact, this reading seems more in accord with the condemnations of the tenth line of stanza 232: "Tu sanles tonnel desnaie" — "You are like an overflowing cask."²⁴ Obviously, being a person "ennaie" may be good or bad; and in this respect, might well be translated as "inhibited." Indeed, many of the attributes of old age identified by theologians such as Giles of Rome²⁵ — incredulity, suspicion, pusillanimity, illberality, hopelessness — can be subsumed under the rubric of "inhibitions." Without doubt these attributes tend to sever the spiritual and physical roots of the elderly, dissolving ties, and leaving the *senex* in much the position of the wandering refugees inhabiting the works of Celestine V, Lull, Abulafia, and others, producing a similar melancholia as a result of loss of "locus."²⁶ But Gerson is less concerned here with the attributes, or symptoms, and more concerned with Satan as the actor who confines the elderly. By what means? The verb seems to evolve from the noun "naie," meaning "chiffon" or "etouffe," rags or stuffing, materials of little value.²⁷ Hence, the devil is seen as clogging their senectitude with rubbish.

Another problem of interpretation lies with the adverb "soubtinement," which McGuire treats as "subtilement," which is manifestly incorrect. Max Lieberman suggests that once again a "v" has been mistranscribed as an "n," rendering the word "soubtivement." I would suggest that, as before, Glorieux's transcription is correct, and that "soubtinement" is a variant of "soubitainment," meaning "subitement," that is "suddenly" or "brutally."²⁸ Therefore, literally the phrase

²³ See Van Hamel's apparatus to Stanza 233, on 262.

²⁴ As the stanza concludes: "Tu as et cuer et cors laie / courre en tous delis sans delai." [You have both body and soul unleashed / to pursue every vice without delay.]

²⁵ Aegidius Romanus, *De regimine principum*, II. IV. c.3.

²⁶ Michael E. Goodich relates this melancholia to "The loss of attachment to one's traditional roots and family . . ." *From Birth to Old Age: The Human Life Cycle in Medieval Thought, 1250–1350* (New York: University Press, 1989), 148–49; but "locus" to the medieval mind, while including those roots, was much broader, so that loss of "locus" approximates the modern notion of having 'no place in life or society.'

²⁷ See [Paul Meyer], "Periodiques," *Romania* 8 (1887): 631.

²⁸ See Lieberman, "Chronologie Gersonienne," 339. The later Latin translation, possibly by Jacob Wompheling, circa 1502, contained in DuPin's edition of the *Opera*, 3:275–76, makes this same error: "... et ad bene conducendum finem tuum, qui fortius infestatur ab inimico quam aetas altera, et subtilius est . . ." [. . . and to administer well your end, which is more beset by the evil one than any other age, and more subtly . . .] Apparently, the argument is that "soubtivement" is a variant of "soutivement," i.e., "subtile-mente," and hence is the equivalent of "subtilement," also rendering McGuire's translation correct by indirection. However, a reading of other works by Gerson on Satanic temptation, e.g., *Tractatus de diversis diaboli tentationibus*, *Opera omnia*, 3:589–602, suggests that adverbs favored by Gerson include "suddenly" and "savagely," though that particular tract is translated from the French.

should be translated as, "This time of life is more bottled-up by the enemy (i.e., Satan) than any other, and more brutally."

Gerson proceeds to demonstrate the implications of this phrase, advising Philippe to take and have with him at all times someone literate in both French and Latin to read prayers and teachings, and to urge him away from distractions, whether company or circumstance. Not that conversation is contraindicated. Rather Gerson encourages Philippe to avoid only worldly conversation and affairs. Profitable conversation, intercourse with devout companions regarding godly matters, is to be encouraged. As the Chancellor writes:

Et vous avez, Dieu mercy, avec vous bonnes gens et devotes pour vous ayder a ce et pour querir les pas des escriptures qui vous seront profitable a lire at pour vous dire au diner ou ailleurs semblable langage comme jay dit de vostre clerc.²⁹

[You have with you, thanks be to God, good and devout people to help you in this purpose and to look up the passages in the scriptures that will be profitable for you to read and to speak with you at the dinner table or elsewhere in a similar language as I mentioned with your cleric.]

Obviously, Gerson would have agreed with the sentiments of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers cited by Ariès, such as Robert Bellarmine or the author of the *Miroir de l'ame pecheresse*, that old age alone does not incline a man to repentance, and that the elderly continue to think only of living.³⁰ But for Gerson this is manifestly a device of Satan, who clutters the minds of the elderly with temporal rags and stuffing: memories of their lost youth, concern for their families, worries about the state of their affairs, reflections upon their lives, whether successes or failures: the very *vanitas*, or meaningless stuff, desire for which constitutes *avaritia* according to the *artes moriendi*.

From this viewpoint, the temptations illustrated in the fifteenth-century *artes moriendi* represent that sly fox Satan's efforts to cull the flock of Christ. Ariès is correct in this respect: that these portrayals illuminate the death of the individual. But the death of the individual, the solitary death, is the unhappy death, the bad death, the death wherein the soul of the *Moriens* is jeopardized. On this point, I think Gerson sounds the monition of St. Anthony: "Woe to him that is alone." But the true Christian is never alone, and in this Gerson anticipates by a century Luther's counsel to those preparing to die.³¹

²⁹ *Oeuvres*, 2:77.

³⁰ See generally Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, Ch. 6; particularly direct on the point of the negligence of the elderly are Robert Bellarmine, *De Arte bene moriendi*, in *Opera omnia*, 12 Vols. (Paris:1870–1875; Reprinted, Frankfurt: Minerva, 1965), 8:551–662; and *Miroir de l'ame du pecheur et du juste: Methode chretienne pour finir saintement sa vie*, 2 vols. (Lyon: F. Viret 1741, 1751; new ed. 1752).

³¹ Martin Luther, *Ein Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben*, WA. 2:695, 11. 31–32: "So aber got auff dich sicht, So sehen ym nach alle engele, alle heyligen, alle creaturen, und so du yn dem glauben bleibst,

The good death is the reward of him who dies in communion with the church universal, in communion with the saints in heaven and on earth.³² One need only to return to the *tripertitum*, and the assertion in the final section that the true friends of the sick are those whose interest is in the spiritual rather than physical well-being of the infirm.³³ Words of encouragement are directed to the *Moriens*, four exhortations the first of which emphasizes the commonality of death. Gerson then recommends the *Amicus* to proceed with a set of six questions, traceable to the pseudo-Anselmic *Admonitio*, first and foremost whether the *Moriens* wishes to live and to die in the Christian faith of our savior Jesus Christ, as a loyal and true child of the Holy Church.³⁴ The remaining five questions are directed to the repentance and supplication of the penitent *Moriens*, assuring him of God's receptivity. The "friend" is directed to administer prayers, emphasizing that the infirm is entirely in the hands of God, and praying for the help of sweet father Jesus, of the virgin, of the angels, and of his patron saint, saying: "In you have I had confidence throughout my life; fail me not in this final need."³⁵ Finally, Gerson sets forth "pointers" on how the friend of the *Moriens* should apply the treatise, recommending prayers and stories which the dying person used during his life, for, as he advises Philippe in his subsequent letter, these will take on more meaning now than they did previously.³⁶ Attendants should be advised to avoid discussion about people or things left behind, whether children, wife or property;

halten sie alle die hend unter." [As God watches over you, so likewise all the angels, and all the saints, and all creatures watch, and thus you remain in the faith, having ready recourse to every mediator.] "... Only the Image ..."

³² For similar thoughts concerning Titian's attitude toward death, see Sophie Bostock's contribution to this volume.

³³ "Si veraces fidelesque amici cuijuspiam aegroti curam diligentius agant pro ipsius vita corporali, fragili et defectibili conservanda; exigunt a nobis multo fortius Deus et Charitas pro salute sua spirituali sollicitudinem gerere specialim: in hac enim extrema mortis necessitate fidelis probatur amicus." [If true and faithful friends earnestly undertake the care of whatever infirm so as to maintain this corporal, fragile and imperfect life, God and charity demand of us more greatly to bear particular responsibility for their spiritual health; indeed, in this final exigency of death is the friend to be judged faithful.] c. 447.

³⁴ These questions significantly correspond to the pseudo-Anselmic *Admonitio*, note 11, *supra*.

³⁵ "O gloriosissime Sancte, vel Sancta, singularem in te dum viverem spem et confidentiam reposui, succurre nunc mihi in hoc extremo necessitatis articulo laboranti . . ." [O most glorious saint I placed my hope particularly in you while alive, aid me now in this final period of troubling exigency.] *Opera omnia*, 1:449 A.

³⁶ "... prenez avec vous ung sachent lire francois et latin . . . a deux fins. Lune pour lire oroisons ou doctrines es queles vous prendrez plus de saveur et avez pris ou temps passe, car maintenant est le temps que vous devez user de ce que vous avez assemble ou temps passe." [. . . Take with you one who knows how to read both french and latin . . . for two reasons. The first is to read prayers or lessons which you grasped in past times, and which you will seize with greater savor, for now is the time you must use those things which you collected in earlier days.] *Oeuvres complètes*, 2:76.

nor should the sick be deluded with false hopes of recovery which may distract them from soulful devotions.³⁷

At the same time, Gerson's *Scientia mortis* is not designed to terrify the *Moriens* into repentance, but to instill confidence. To this end, his pastoral advice emphasizes the communal nature of the passing-over. As McGuire notes, "if we see only the sense of powerlessness, we forget that he encouraged the helpers of the dying to make the journey easier and more peaceful."³⁸ At the same time, if we see only the aid of the church visible in easing this otherwise powerless journey, we detract from Gerson's very real belief in a church invisible, a heavenly multitude, in whom the *Moriens* is entitled to have confidence, indeed, must have confidence as a soteriological prerequisite to perseverance in the faith. Indeed, should the *Moriens* be considered powerless with the heavenly host favorably disposed to his earnest supplication? If God be for us, who can be against us? Did not Christ afford the faithful the power to become sons of God?

And this, I suggest, is what sets old age and/or infirmity apart for Gerson. Truly, sudden death was a great fear in the Middle Ages, for short shrift was believed to have serious purgatorial consequences, and even a damning last minute loss of faith was possible. Thus, one of Satan's tactics, described by Gerson in his French treatise on the diverse temptations of Satan is sometimes to conceal the temptation until death arrives, at which moment surely he more savagely and with greater guile tests us and attacks us, knowing if we fail at that point, we are totally frustrated.³⁹ For Satan's goal, as described in the Chancellor's *Sermon On the Ascension* delivered to the newly elected Pope Alexander and his court in 1409, is to frustrate the augmentation of the church triumphant, the heavenly host, with the faithful of the church militant, thereby replenishing the numbers lost when

³⁷ "Nullatenus aut minime si fieri possit morienti amici carnales, uxor, liberi, vel divitiae ad memoriam reducantur, nisi in quantum id exigit patientis spiritualis sanitas, et dum alias convenienter omitti nequit. Non detur infirmo nimia spes corporalis salutis consequendae, ingeratur potius eidem prima monitio superius explicata. Saepe namque per unam talem inanem et falsam consolationem, et incertam sanitatis corporeae confidentiam, certam incurrit homo damnationem." [If it can be done, carnal friends, spouses, children or wealth should be brought to memory minimally or not at all, unless the spiritual health of the patient demands it, and when it is impossible otherwise properly to avoid it. The infirm should not be given any hope of obtaining physical recovery, rather at the very beginning this first straightforward warning should be impressed upon him. For often as a result of one such empty and false comfort and doubtful assurance of physical health, surely a man incurs damnation.] *Opera omnia*, 1:449 D.

³⁸ Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation, 345.

³⁹ *Opera omnia*, 3:590–602; here 590: "Hanc autem occultat aliquando tentationem quoadusque mors advenit, quo sane tempore saevius, majorique dolo tentat et confligit, sciens si tunc defecerit, penitus se frustratum." [Moreover, sometimes he conceals some temptation until death arrives, at which time surely he tests and strikes more savagely and with greater guile, knowing that if he fails at that juncture, he is thoroughly frustrated.]

Satan fell taking a third of the angels with him.⁴⁰ But at least in sudden death, Satan has limited time to tamper with the ultimate faith of the *Moriens*. The slow death leaves Satan plenty of opportunity to conjure up the temptations standardized in the *Ars moriendi*: unbelief, despair, impatience, pride and avarice, in a sort of war of attrition, in the same manner as he has the luxury of tormenting those following *solitudinis vitam ineptum*, as Gerson describes in his eighth tract on the Magnificat.⁴¹

What renders a life of solitude vain? Certainly one should consider the passage from the life of St. Anthony which Gerson quotes in his letter to Philippe, and which he was fond of including in other works and sermons. According to this story, St. Anthony during his devotions began to contemplate the sorry state of the world and its inhabitants, and was growing melancholy, when suddenly an angel appeared, directing him to think on himself, and leave the governance of others to God.⁴²

In his edition of the *Early Works*, McGuire suggested that Gerson perverts this story from a message of humility to counsel that Philippe think of his own selfish interests,⁴³ but I would disagree with this interpretation. The command to St. Anthony is to occupy himself humbly in his vocation and not dwell on temporal matters. It is not selfish advice to Anthony, nor is it to Philippe, for it does not mean "think of yourself" in an egotistical sense. As Gerson explains in his *Petit livre contre detraction*, it ill-profits a monk or hermit to think about three things: his profession, his tranquility and his perfection.⁴⁴ Indeed, the elderly and the sick who are both unprepared and unsupported during long periods of reclusion are very much like those who have adopted an unsuitable life of solitude, subject to discouragement, second-guessing, regrets, temptations we would today call

⁴⁰ *Opera omnia*, 2:131–41.

⁴¹ *Opera omnia*, 4:352–392, at 364D: "Circumit et considerate Satan iste alterum quem ex instabilitate propria, vel infirmitate cognoscit ad Religionis, aut solitudinis vitam ineptum." [This satan walks about and carefully investigates whom on account of peculiar inconstancy or infirmity is unsuitable for a life of ascetism or solitude.] Or at 367D: "Circumit iste Satan, iste depositus, et invenit hominem in solitudine vel deserti sicut est pellicanus; vel domicili, sicut nycticorax, vel tecti, sicut passer . . ." [This satan, this forsaken one, goes about and finds a man in the solitude of the wilderness to be as a pelican, or of the house, as a nycticorax, or of the cloister, as a sparrow . . .]

⁴² *Vitae Patrum* 15.1, PL 73:953.

⁴³ Note 255 to *Early Letters*, *Early Works*, 431.

⁴⁴ "Mal prouffite a un religieux ou solitaire penser a ces trois choses en especial: a sa profession, a son repos et a sa perfection. La perfection et la fin d'un religieux est mourir au monde, c'est-a-dire que il ne doit parler ou penser des choses mondaines pour en iugier ou pour les amender ne que c'il fust mort au monde." [It ill benefits a monk or hermit to think about three things in particular: about his profit, about his tranquility and about his perfection. The accomplishment and end of an ascetic is to die to the world, that is to say, that he must not speak or think about mundane things either to judge or amend them, but only that he has died to the world.] In "Pour qu'on refrène sa langue," ed. E. Vansteenbergh, *Revue des sciences religieuses* 15 (1935), 554–66; here 558.

"psychological," and of which the five enumerated temptations of the illustrated *artes moriendi* are but the symptoms or the tokens.

Ideally, perhaps, all Christians might have prepared themselves for confronting such demonic torments through long practice of spiritual exercise, building the spiritual muscle of a St. Anthony, as it were. Surely, advocates of the *Devotio Moderna* would so argue. But Gerson as a pastor, recognizes that for most of the faithful, escaping the temptations is a group endeavor. The faithful must cling to the faith as their shield, but be comforted knowing as well that they are in *custodia angelorum*. Gerson describes in his sermon on All Saints, *Exultabant*,⁴⁵ how the saints in heaven are praying that those on earth persevere so as to deserve a place as citizens in the blessed *civitatem*. As Peter in prison was in imminent danger of death, but for the Church praying continuously, the prayers of the Church likewise attend the final vigil for the Christian *viator*.⁴⁶ But if they are wise in their pursuit of a good death, they also are accompanied in their withdrawal by a spiritual attendant who will fill-in for St. Anthony's angel. As Gerson writes:

[l'autre fin est] pour vous enhorter a toutes heures ou il veira que vous vauriez faire le contraire par compaignie ou autrement, qu vous ne parles de choze mundaine quelconque mez plus que se vous fuciez mort au monde et le monde a vous.⁴⁷

[. . . He will encourage you at all times, whenever he sees that you would do otherwise due to company or circumstance. He will keep you from speaking of temporal affairs anymore than you would were you dead to the world and the world to you.]

This is hardly the individual death described by Tenenti, Ariès or Binski as a judicial ordeal in which the supernatural beings are there simply as spectators and witnesses. It is too easy to become captivated with Savonarolan chessgames as *Moriens*, left to his own devices, seeks to avoid checkmate by Satan. Rather, Gerson understands the burdens of old age in terms very much like the meaning attributed to *ennui* by modern psychologists and sociologists: an isolation that emerges from weariness and dissatisfaction with life as a consequence of loss of interest or sense of excitement. And in this sense, Gerson's *ennuye* of the early fifteenth century has come by subtle shift of meaning to be the *ennui* of the mid-twentieth. This *ennui* and its attendant *melancholia* attacks particularly those who feel alone due to a remoteness from society, whom Gerson describes as dead to the world and the world to them, whether by choice or circumstance—the aged, but also invalids, hermits, and refugees—a status with which Gerson would become well-acquainted later in life. Today's advice would be to become more

⁴⁵ Sermo I de omnibus Sanctis, *Opera omnia*, 3:1505–15.

⁴⁶ Indeed, in this life we are all "in carcere, in captivitate, et in exilio . . ." Sermo V de Festo omnium Sanctorum, *Opera omnia*, 3:1541–51; here 1541.

⁴⁷ *Oeuvres complètes*, 2:76–77.

"involved" — take up a hobby, join a club. Gerson's advice, to the contrary, is to let go of this world — do not become "ennaye" — do not let Satan fill you with thoughts of yourself or the cares of the world:

En outltre par mon petit conseil vous donres congie a tout autre occupation et a toute compagnie estrange qui vous porroit destourber de ce que dit est. Et suppose quaucum ennuy vous [] jaieme mielx que vous dormes ou soyes sano riens faire que vous occuper en teles parisseuses paroles qui engendrent pis que nest ennemy a lame.⁴⁸

[Additionally, in my humble opinion you should turn from all other preoccupation or outside company that might disturb you from that which has been said. And presuming any burden [weigh upon(?)] you, I would much prefer you sleep or remain unoccupied than engage in such perilous conversations as beget worse for the soul than does the adversary.]

As he admonished Philippe—look to the future, recalling his own favorite quotation from St. Paul: "nostra conversatio in coelis est." (Phil. 3:20). Thus, as Gerson comforts Philippe, "y vault mielx tart que jamais exequer cecy": it is better to leave the world late than never.

In the last analysis, for Gerson senectitude represents both a period of unparalleled danger and of unequalled opportunity for those whose temporal obligations have denied them the luxury of leisurely contemplation. For regardless of vocation, a time comes voluntarily or involuntarily for retirement, when the burdens of responsibility to others may be decently laid aside, and the Christian *viator* reminded daily, as were the emperor and St. John the Almsgiver in Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea*: "sire pansez a vous. Pansez a vostre fin. A vostre mort. . . ." [Sire, think of yourself, think of your end, of your death.] This preparation should not be seen as a burden, but a blessing. Hence, Gerson's last words to Philippe are a quotation from *Lamentations* 3:26: "bonum est praestolari cum silentio salutare"—it is good to await with silence the salvation of the Lord.

⁴⁸ *Oeuvres complètes*, 2: 77.

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Representations of Aging and Disability in Early Sixteenth-Century French Farce

Disability is often equated with aging in the Middle Ages and through the sixteenth century in France. Disability Studies and Old Age Studies, both growing fields of interdisciplinary critical inquiry in Humanities research today, are only recently beginning to receive the critical attention they deserve in relation to medieval studies and literary criticism.¹ Disability Studies and Old Age Studies both offer an important critical perspective of difference. As an example of the possible applications of the critical lenses provided by Disability Studies and Old Age Studies to medieval dramatic or narrative literature, this study focuses on French farce, demonstrating that representation of bodily difference, in particular of aging bodies and disabled bodies, is tied to the construction of identity in French farce ca. 1520–1530.² Before turning to a close reading of farce images and dialogues on aging and disability, first an overview of relevant current disability theory, and then examples of selected familiar disabled figures in other prior medieval French genres influencing the farce will provide a useful context.

Given that this chapter deals with the intersection of Old Age Studies and Disability Studies, a word on the theoretical notions adopted here from the latter critical perspective is in order.³ Literary representations of disability and

¹ A recent overview of Disability Studies in the Humanities, including examples of its application in literary studies, visual studies, and cultural studies, is provided by *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: Modern Language Association, 2002).

² In the farce, characters are identified by their disabilities and disability is a part of identity, despite Irina Metzler's statement that disability not a factor in medieval identity (focusing on medieval miracle narratives in a historical context, Metzler's work has made a recent and welcome contribution in the area of Disability Studies and medieval studies): Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment in the High Middle Ages, c.1100 – c.1400*. Routledge Research in Medieval Religion and Culture (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

³ Further related concepts, as well as a discussion of the notion of disability in relation to notions of "normalcy," are covered by Rosemarie Garland Thomson, "Disability, Identity, and Representation:

impairments due to aging address stereotypes and perceptions, in opposition to what may be considered “normal” in a given fictional universe, or in opposition to the supposed normate, or “normal,” reader or audience. Here the term “normate” may be understood broadly in Disability Studies theory today as an identity construction not based on bodily difference that results in a position of authority and comparison and moreover, as Garland Thomson has shown, “the term normate usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings.”⁴ Thus normate characters and audiences become the definitions and constructions by which disabled, aged, or other characters of bodily difference are judged.

The analysis of farce below is informed by Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s study on perceptions of the normate versus disabled. A literary text or performance, as Rosemarie Garland Thomson has explained, provides a different experience of disability than real life, as we will see in the example of the farce. Literary or theatrical representation of disability and disabled persons’ experiences are dissimilar because,

“Besides stripping any normalizing context away from disability, literary representation sets up static encounters between disabled figures and normate readers, whereas real social relations are always dynamic. Focusing on a body feature to describe a character throws the reader into a confrontation with the character that is predetermined by cultural notions about disability.”⁵

Many medieval and sixteenth-century elderly characters of short fiction or drama are characterized thus merely by a certain “bodily feature,” such as blindness, a limp, or impotence, and by other characters’ reactions to this bodily feature that is somehow different from the normate features of the “normal” characters or the normate audience.

In revisiting late-medieval and early-modern French literary and theatrical texts from the perspective of Disability Studies, it becomes evident that old age and disability were social constructions and literary identity labels, already in existence in this period.⁶ Because they could be members of any socio-economic class,

An Introduction,” *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 5–15.

⁴ Eadem, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 8–9.

⁵ Eadem, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 11

⁶ It is not anachronistic to apply the terminology of Disability Studies prior to the twentieth-century, rather, it gives us a useful perspective and set of terms to address the experiences and representations of persons with Disability in almost any time period; see for example the survey of the study of disability in other periods by Margaret A. Winzer, “Disability and Society before the Eighteenth Century,” *The Disability Studies Reader*. ed. Lennard J. Davis. 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 75–109. See pages 52–74, 75–80, 89–106 in particular for sections

elderly persons and persons with disabilities were not a small silent minority in medieval and early modern France and consequently there are numerous fictional representations of them in the extant farces, a genre which often focuses on aspects of everyday life in an urban setting.⁷ Disability Studies theory urges us to look at texts from a different perspective, and not to confine readings or performances to the normate perspective. Though according to medical, monastic, and civil records, disability resulting from old age, disease, accident, birth defect, malnutrition, environment, genetics, or other factors was far from uncommon throughout the Middle Ages and the sixteenth century in Europe, it was nevertheless often viewed with varying levels of misunderstanding, wonder, or disdain by authors, and one might assume, by the public in their everyday encounters with elderly persons with disabilities.

Indeed, in the late Middle Ages such differences often became a person's primary identifying feature, and in literary and dramatic texts, often their very name or title.⁸ Visible or audible physical differences resulting from age, or from disability or impairment associated with age, or from disease associated with age marked people, thereby assigning them marginalized or excluded social status; characters in theater and narrative fiction alike are represented as other, paradoxically either stigmatized or revered, or both, for their different bodies and differing abilities.⁹

pertinent to the Middle Ages and the early modern period.

⁷ Lynette R. Muir estimates that about 300 French farces, *sotties*, and moralities are extant today, and that the farce remained the most popular genre of medieval theater for the longest period of time: Lynette R. Muir, "Farces, Sotties, and Moralities," *The Medieval European Stage, 500–1550: Theatre in Europe: A Documentary History*, ed. William Tydeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 279–345; here 329.

⁸ Here the reader is referred back to Classen's chapter in the present volume, in which a central figure in The Stricker's narrative is referred to as "Old Man" or "Old Man of the Mountain" thus identified primarily by his age group rather than by a name or title.

⁹ The old and the disabled were marginalized throughout the Middle Ages in military, religious, and social areas of daily life. Chroniclers, theologians, and composers of farce alike considered the old and/or disabled somehow other. Shulamith Shahar notes that both Mathew Paris's chronicle of the 1241 Crusade and Aquinas place the old and the disabled outside the margins as ". . . the common denominator of the children, women, the disabled and the old was their physical frailty, which barred them from fighting. When Thomas Aquinas dealt with the question as to who may be given the sacrament of confirmation, he distinguished between the earthly and the heavenly plane: in the latter everyone may do battle for the Lord, even children, women, slaves and the old. In earthly struggles, however, a suitable age, physical strength and status are required, and therefore children, old people, women and slaves were excluded from taking part in them. . . . Sometimes the chief factor of marginality was the social status, and the old were listed within the low social stratum, alongside cripples and strangers." Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: "Winter clothes us in shadow and pain"*, trad. Yael Lotan (1995; London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 2–3.

Representations of Aging and Disability

Many older characters of narrative and farce are represented as physically or mentally disabled as well; they are deaf, or blind, or they have limited mobility due to hereditary deformity, accident or violent injury, malnutrition, or disease, or most frequently, due to old age, thereby doubly excluding them from the social order. Older bodies in later medieval French farce and narrative are marked in particular by descriptions of wrinkles, deformities, weak limbs, incontinence, impotence, declining appetite, sight and hearing impairment, or signs of disease and declining health resulting from age. Whether approached with cruelty or charity, set apart by such marks and by the very differences they embody, farce figures are defined by both negative and positive cultural perceptions of their old age and physical or mental limitations.

Those who are both old and disabled have bodies that are doubly marked and they are therefore doubly marginalized by these features. In other words, old age and disability combine to create double stereotypes in the farce and other medieval texts. Particular impairments associated with old age by late medieval authors, such as deafness and blindness, paralysis and dementia, are treated with ambiguity across the *fabliaux* and the farce corpus, and punished with shame or stigma or, conversely, rewarded by special gifts of knowledge or talent in other areas. Medieval disability identity is complex, and not treated in a consistently negative light, since disabled old men and old women are often portrayed as bearers of knowledge in narrative literature, or are given the voice of truth not attributed to other able-bodied characters in farce dialogue. Hence meetings and dialogues with such figures may serve a structural function in both dramatic and narrative literature as they reveal knowledge to the characters and the audience. Medieval authors often regard disability resulting from age as a form of inadequacy that is compensated for in other ways; decrepitude is often compensated for by forms of wisdom.¹⁰ True, as we can observe throughout this volume, ugliness, dementia, and unkind dispositions are often associated with age and disability in medieval fiction and theater as in modern times, but bodily impairment, illness, or weaknesses are often replaced by other mental gifts or social strengths.

In the Middle Ages, as today, identity is constructed in part as the binary opposition of "normal"/not "normal," or "normate"/disabled more specifically. Medieval identity is culturally constructed around social rank, gender, and appearance as well as by the categories of disabled/able-bodied, as explained by

¹⁰ In Britt Rothhauser's contribution to this volume, we see that decrepitude is also associated with advanced age in the case of Hrothgar, as it is for other figures discussed in this volume.

Aquinas and as evident in fictional works. Appearance and the physical being count for a great deal in medieval narrative poetry and theater, in which portraits are often repetitions of common place elements and such portraits of heroes and heroines constitute what is "normal" or better than normal, for example, strength, strong arms and legs, clear complexions, and unsurpassed natural beauty constitute beauty in the Old French narrative tradition. Anything outside such commonplaces is a representation of something different, other, or extraordinary. Sight and hearing impairments, limited mobility, physical deformities or disfigurement appear frequently. In medieval drama treated with ambiguity and treated as different, they may be linked notions of illness or disease and characterized as "*malade*" or "*miserable*," but they are not however treated as "monstrous," the increasingly popular term scholars of medieval literature and art historians have employed recently for such figures, nor should they be labeled as such; in medieval studies, the terminology of illness and monstrosity must be separated from the terminology of disability and impairment.

Literary representations of disabled persons appear across generic lines, and before the farce, they appear as marginal and titular characters in courtly romance and the Old French fabliaux.

A few select examples of the complex paradoxical treatment of old and disabled figures from earlier genres will suffice here to give an idea of what came before the farce and its exaggerated treatments of such figures (though a comprehensive overview of figures in these genres is beyond the scope of my paper). In European courtly romance, for example, many figures who embody difference, such as the injured aging kings or knights marked by wounds or madness, as well as characters referred in the texts as fools, mutes, and *nains* (little people) play important roles that highlight difference in the narrative.¹¹ While young heroes of twelfth- through fifteenth-century European narrative romance, such as Erec, Cligés, Lancelot, and Tristan are regularly described as handsome with strong, well-formed limbs, face, and body, older secondary characters appear as wounded, feeble, or mentally and physically impaired; furthermore, figures with physical or mental disabilities or with what would have been considered bodily deformities or defects, people such texts, introducing difference and

¹¹ Albrecht Classen, "Außenseiter der Gesellschaft im späthöfischen Roman, Volksbuch und Volkslied. Eine literar-soziologische und ethnologische Untersuchung," *Europäische Ethnologie und Folklore im internationalen Kontext. Festschrift für Leander Petzold zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Ingo Schneider (Frankfurt a.M., Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 1999), 351–66; Vladimir Tr. Hafstein, "Dwarfs," *Medieval Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs*, ed. Carl Lindahl, John McNamara, and John Lindow. Vol. 1 (Santa Barbara, Denver, and Oxford: ABC-Clio, 2000), 258–60.

problematizing the notion of what is normal in the highly conventional universe of courtly romance.¹²

The Fisher King is perhaps the most familiar aging and disabled figure of medieval romance. In the grail romances, the Fisher King, the *roi pecheur* of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century French verse and prose Arthurian tradition, who also appears in the German, Welsh, and English versions, who is both aging and physically impaired, usually described as wounded through the thigh, is given elevated status. As a central figure around which the romances revolve, he is depicted as revered, possessing mysterious or *merveilleux* knowledge, wisdom, and power that able-bodied, younger characters do not. While Arthur and other aging kings are sometimes portrayed as old, inactive, physically weak, or melancholy, the Fisher King's immobility and disability set him apart, at once on the margins and at the very center of the European Arthurian romance tradition.

To generalize, whereas difference is celebrated often in earlier romance, in the thirteenth-century French fabliaux corpus, consisting of about 150 texts that often focus on graphic comic imagery of bodies and bodily functions, more aging and disabled figures begin to appear in an almost wholly pejorative light. In the violent and often cruel world of the fabliaux, in relation to what is considered normate, individuals marked by bodily features are identified by the marks on their body or by their differences or deficiencies, seen as deformed, maimed, defective, or decrepit—such as in the *Lai d'Ignaure* or *La Dame escoillee* [The Castrated Woman],¹³ which includes images of maiming, cutting out eyes, cutting off hands, and mutilation with mock-castration.¹⁴ Men and women are often identified solely by bodily features, bodily functions, bodily appetites, or appearance in the fabliaux. *Les trois bossus* [The Three Hunchbacks] is yet another fabliau focused on bodily difference, in this case “hunchbacks,” who are identified merely by their physical difference and eschewed by society and murdered as an accessory to a woman's adultery. These and numerous other anonymous fabliaux focus on the rejection of physical difference, drawing even more distinct and dividing lines between normate character/disabled character and normate audience/disabled character than in earlier romance.

The mid-fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries see an increase in the number of disability and aging narratives, perhaps responding to such representations found in romance and fabliaux, along with a more in-depth exploration of experiences

¹² See the contributions to this volume by Rasma Lazda-Cazers and Jean E. Jost.

¹³ Ed. Willem Noomen, *Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1995). Translations, title translations, and paraphrases into English are mine unless otherwise noted.

¹⁴ Though he does not refer to disability and age as such, Jerry Root has explored several examples of maiming, images of body parts, and related tropes in terms of allegory and “disfiguration” in the fabliaux: Jerry Root, “The Old French Fabliaux and the Poetics of Disfiguration,” *Medievalia et Humanistica* 24 (1997): 17–32.

of old age and disability throughout Europe (as for example in the fifteenth-century Castilian autobiography of a disabled nun, *Arboleda de los enfermos*, recently studied by Juarez in light of current disability theory, or throughout French and Spanish miracle narratives, some of which have been recently studied by Irina Metzler).¹⁵ In the 1500's, dramatic and literary texts including the French farce corpus seem to reflect a rise in the number of persons with disabilities, or at least a greater awareness of disability. Physical impairment, mental illness, and disability were common in this period, due to many potential factors of the period, such as possibly: contemporary wars and the invention of new weapons resulting in physically disabled veterans or mental illness and increased records and visibility of such individuals, along with growth of urban environments and debilitating disease associated with this, or malnutrition and associated conditions such as blindness, gout, or diabetes.

The short dramatic comic farces explore questions of difference through the acting out of blindness, deafness, and other physical impairments, while they create a literary space of difference on a stage inhabited by many bodies performing disability.¹⁶ To some extent, though fictional, farce texts provide representations that may invite some assumptions about cultural attitudes toward aging and disability in this period, attitudes that in general favor normalcy, ability, and similarity over difference.

Because of their emphasis on performance, physicality, movement, and the body, the farce more fully explores bodily topics such as aging, hearing and sight impairments, impotence, dementia, illness and disease, and differing physical abilities than do other genres. The farces of *Le Ramoneur des cheminées*, *Goguelu*, and *Mimin et les deux sourds*, on which this study focuses, are examples of farce that depict with ambiguity characters who are aging and have different physical impairments, with characterization and description zooming in on different body parts and different physical impairments.¹⁷ The views that non-disabled characters, that is to say those who are positioned as normate in comparison and have an identity related to something other than a bodily difference, have on those with disabilities, ranging from shock to indifference to endearment to insult, are

¹⁵ Encarnacion Juarez, "The Autobiography of the Aching Body in Teresa de Cartagena's *Arboleda de los enfermos*," *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, ed. Sharon L. Snyder, Brenda Jo Brueggemann, and Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: Modern Language Association, 2002). On the miracle narratives, see Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe*.

¹⁶ See Muir, "Farces, Sotties, and Moralities," 330 on other farces or farce elements in mystery plays with blind characters or those who are referred to as "cripple" characters.

¹⁷ The critical editions of farces to which the present study refers are by Tissier and Cohen. Citations from *Goguelu* are from: *Recueil de farces françaises inédites du XVe siècle*, ed. Gustave Cohen (Cambridge, MA: Medieval Academy of America, 1949), all others from *Recueil de Farces 1450-1550*, 13 vols. ed. André Tissier (Geneva: Droz, 1999).

perhaps to some extent revealing of the range of contemporary perceptions, which are not wholly negative.

Building on such representations contemporary perceptions, as well as on perhaps to some extent representations of disability from earlier fabliaux and novella (beyond the scope of the present study), several anonymous French farces composed and/or performed ca. 1500–1535 focus on daily life in the upper-middle-class household and simultaneously represent, challenge, and reinforce societal norms regulating the middle class dwelling and its inhabitants. The farce is in general a piece of social satire, a performance focused on everyday life and marked by a tone of derision and mockery.¹⁸ Among the many comical power plays represented on the stage of the French farce, theatrical comic discord appears when clashes between youth and age, ability and disability, occur between household members, resulting in household hierarchies that are questioned through exaggerated emotional discourse and almost slapstick physical movement. A genre based on debate, dialogue, conflict, game, and trickery, the farce portrays household life as a comical battle for power, both visually and verbally. Often assumed to be similar in socio-economic status to their likely audience, the characters are often middle class, or bourgeois, characterized by their professions or by their physical traits, age, and disabilities.

Titles (or main characters in untitled works) such as *Mimin le goutteux et les deux sourds* [Mimin with Gout and the Two Deaf Men], and *Goguelu (ou L'Aveugle)* [Goguelu, or The Blind Man], *Lucas, Sergent boiteux et borgne* [Lucas, The Lame, One-Eyed Debt-Collector],¹⁹ among many others, show that aging and physical differences, impairments, or dysfunctions were performed, investigated, and even mocked through this comic dramatic genre. Disabilities and old age in the farce serve metaphorically to show exclusion and dissatisfaction with society,

¹⁸ For a more comprehensive discussion of the typology and characteristics of farce in this period, see Barbara Bowen, *Les Caractéristiques essentielles de la farce française et leur survivance dans les années 1550–1620* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964).

¹⁹ The *Dictionnaire de l'académie française* gives the following definitions and etymology dating from the twelfth century for the term *borgne*, moving from the idea of having only one eye to other physical deficiencies or incompleteness and negative images by analogy, with negative connotations related to such disabilities: (1) *Borgne*, adj. XIII^e siècle, d'abord au sens de qui louche. Origine obscure. 1. Qui n'a qu'un œil ; qui ne voit que d'un œil. *Un homme borgne. Un cheval borgne.* Expr. fig. *Changer, troquer son cheval borgne contre un cheval aveugle, voir Aveugle.* Fam. *Jaser comme une pie borgne, parler beaucoup.* Subst. *Un, une borgne.* Prov. *Au royaume des aveugles, les borgnes sont rois, on brille aisément au milieu d'un entourage médiocre.* 2. Par anal. Qui présente un aspect incomplet, qui semble n'être pas ce qu'il devrait être. *Compte borgne, qui n'est pas juste.* MARINE. *Ancre borgne, à une seule patte.*—BÂT. *Fenêtre borgne, qui donne du jour, mais ne permet pas de voir au-dehors.* Par ext. *Une maison borgne, une maison sombre et obscure.* *Dictionnaire de l'académie française* <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/dictionnaire/index.html> (last accessed on March 18, 2007).

dissatisfaction with society's views of difference, and with one's place in society; the disabled and elderly are viewed with contempt by other characters and characterized as malicious, callous, spiteful, or shameful, showing verbal anger or physical violence in dialogue and stage directions.²⁰ Disabled and aging characters serve to show the contemporary normate audience that there is little place for difference in society, creating in particular awareness of the needs of the disabled elderly.

The farce of *Lucas, Sergent boiteux et borgne* (ca. 1518–1520) portrays an adulterous wife who is able to evade her sight-impaired husband by covering his one seeing eye, in a plot similar to that of tale sixteen of *Les cent nouvelles nouvelles*, roughly contemporary French novella often focusing on domestic relations, composed decades prior.²¹ In the farce version, the adulterous wife tells the unsuspecting husband that she has dreamt that God has restored sight in both eyes, and covers his seeing eye to hide her lover from the husband's view. His identity, his interaction with his wife, and indeed his very name, consist only of his disabilities and bodily features. The additional disability of the limp adds to the characterization of the older, cuckolded, sight-impaired husband in the novella version, and is charged with sexual signification, implying not only impaired movement, but sexual impotence. The term *boiteux* refers to his limp, impairment or weakness, but would be equivalent of the English term "lame" here, with negative connotations. Both disabilities, as well as the adjective *borgne*, a pejorative term related to sight impairment, and by extension covering a wide semantic field of other disabilities since the twelfth century, emphasize inadequacy and abnormality; the text uses his disabilities to represent and draw attention to inadequacies in other areas, such as failures in his marital and financial relations. He is unable to see that others are cheating him. Through metonymy, his identity becomes merely "l'oeil borgne," [the impaired eye] or "la jambe boiteuse" [the limping leg], with each impaired body part representing the whole.

The wife curses his disabilities several times, echoing in her monologue many the late medieval and early sixteenth-century views of disabled persons as being ugly, representing sin, and bringing bad luck: "Quel Malheur de rencontrer un boiteux! Lucifer emporte le borgne que d'un si mauvais œil je lorgne. Borgne, boiteux, Dieu! quel rencontre! Il porte le plus grand malheur, par Dieu que le bois du gibet. Il n'est rien de plus sale ni de plus laid. Qu'il aille au diable, le miserable"

²⁰ Torture and violence against the aged is rampant in medieval theater. For a comprehensive study of the performance and the rhetoric of violence, torture, and physical abuse in all genres of medieval theater, see Jody Enders, *The Medieval Theater of Cruelty: Rhetoric, Memory, Violence* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999). She views *Goguelu* as a play which "revolves around the reversal of victims and agents—another sine qua non of the ideology of torture," 147.

²¹ *Les cent nouvelles nouvelles: Publiées d'après le seul manuscrit connu*, 2 vols. ed. Thomas Wright (Boston: Adamant Media, 2003).

[What bad luck to meet a lame man! Lucifer carry off this blind man, that from such a bad eye I see . . . Blind, Lame, God! What a meeting! He carries the worst luck, by God, than the wood of the gallows. There's nothing dirtier nor uglier. He should go to Hell, that miserable one!] (266–68). His disability is described as a symbol that is even more unlucky than the wood of the gallows, she says, thus associated with death, crime, sin, and punishment. Furthermore, Lucas is viewed as inferior by the debtors from whom he attempts to collect money:

LE BON PAYEUR – Lucas, tu n'y vois qu'à demi; tu es borgne et, en plus, boiteux.

[Lucas, you can only see half way; you're half blind and, what's more, lame.]

LUCAS – Je vois d'un œil mieux que toi des deux. Je me tiens toujours sur mes gardes.

[I see from one eye better than you from two. I always pay attention.]

LE BON PAYEUR – Inutilement, car tu ne regardes la semaine que de travers. [Futile, because you only see everything sideways].

LUCAS – Tu me sers de mots si divers que tu crois pouvoir m'abuser. [You hit me with such different words that you think you can abuse me] (263).

Though the aging man is seen as subhuman by his wife and others that identify him only by his sight impairment and limp, in this dialogue he does not see himself as inferior, contrary to the discriminatory language of his wife and the *payeur*, but rather considers that he is actually able to see better, to see the truth better in other words, than his able-bodied detractors, following the contemporary view that disability gives one other enhanced abilities. Viewed in a positive light, he is thus able to use his difference to point out injustice in society. Pointing out the *tromperie* of others on several occasions, he shows that appearances are deceiving and that he is able to see the truth despite, or indeed because of, his sight impairment; therefore his limitation is compensated with a gift none of the other characters possess. His irritable mood is associated with his blindness and age throughout this farce.

His wife describes her aging blind husband as capable in some areas, but ill-tempered and intimidating as he enacts his civil service duties, “ . . . en ville où il observe tout, où il tourmente les pauvres gens. Il est actif et diligent. Il y effraie mainte personne. Il sait bien comment se conduire . . . ” [in town, where he observes everything, where he torments the poor people. He is active and diligent] (265). Thus, Lucas's old age and his physical difference are noticed by others, and indeed the difference bothers normative people, but does not hinder him in the activities of his employment, she claims. Such reactions to bodily difference in the farce are in line with what Rosemarie Garland Thomson has shown about attitudes toward disability, that “when one person has a visible disability, however, it

almost always skews the normate's process of sorting out perceptions and forming a reaction."²²

Exploring aging and two different forms of disability, in *Mimin le goutteux et les deux sourds* (ca. 1526–1534) Mimin is the old master who is confined to a chair and housebound because of his gout. His disability is caused by old age and disease. He is served by his younger valet and caretaker, Richard le Pelé, who is deaf. The servant is likened to the master because of his hearing impairment, but is set in sharp contrast to the master because of his youth. In addition, there is another character that appears to be deaf but is only pretending. The deaf domestic servant takes care of Mimin's needs, such as household chores, administering his medicines and preparing his meals and baths. The servant is probably the first known deaf figure in French theater, and it is striking that he serves a disabled, aging master. Their disabilities being a common point between them, the two men live mostly in silence and rely on gestures to communicate. The older master relies on the young servant's physical health and energy for his own health and basic survival needs. Confusion ensues as their disabilities clash and the hearing impaired valet is unable to hear enough to understand Mimin the master's request to send for a doctor to examine him and ease his pain. The dialogue and rhymes play with sounds that are meant to highlight the difference in speech and comprehension with a hearing impaired person; verbal humor in misunderstood words, homophonies, and *double entendres* create laughter at the expense of the hearing impaired valet. Both make reference to the "maudite goutte" [cursed gout] (1) his "pauvre coeur" [poor heart] (2) and poor condition, his ripe old age and his incontinence (7–8), while the deaf servant, misunderstood by the master, is called "ce méchant sourd" [this mean deaf man] (39). Approaching the final stage of life as well as the end of his proverbial rope, Mimin expresses his pain and self pity at his own disability and at hiring a disabled, deaf servant:

A mourir ici je m'attends!
 Car je n'ai plus sang ni couleur.
 Tu m'aggraves bien ma douleur.
 Jamais pauvre paralytique
 Ne fut, tant que je suis, étique!
 A crier je me romps la tête!
 Hélas! un homme est une bête
 Qui prend valet à sourd oreille.
 Nulle misère n'est pareille,
 A celle qu'il faut chaque jour
 Subir avec ce méchant sourd!
 Maudit soit qui me l'adressa,

²² Garland Thomson, *Disability Studies*, 12

Car jamais il ne me causa
 Que du mal! Il me sait malade . . .

[I'm waiting to die here!
 Because I have neither blood nor color.
 You're really making my pain worse.
 Never such a poor paralyzed person
 Has been, as emaciated as I am!
 Screaming I'm splitting my head!
 Alas! A man is stupid
 Who employs a deaf valet.
 No misery is comparable,
 To that which every day I must
 Endure with this mean deaf one!
 Cursed he who speaks to me,
 Because never he'll cause me
 Ill! He knows I'm ill . . . , 47–60].

This monologue gives insight into contemporary perceptions of the old and disabled or paralyzed as being viewed as miserable and self-pitying, as in “pauvre paralytique” [poor paralyzed man] or in the last line of the text, with the plea “Et délivrez-moi de ma maladie” [And deliver me from my illness]. It should be noted that the image of the elderly as constantly miserable and complaining was not confined to the farce, and can be seen for centuries across Europe, as we have seen in Albrecht Classen’s discussion of Hugo von Trimberg’s (ca. 1300) characterization of old people as complainers.²³

The central themes of the farce of *Le Ramoneur de cheminées* [The Chimney Sweep] are aging, physical disability due to age, and male impotence, all treated with critical humor on aging and nostalgia for youth (first composed ca. 1508, adapted 1520). The central character is an old man, who is considering his retirement, his retirement from his profession, and his retirement from womanizing. This farce presents a comic case study of one man’s experiencing the last of the “ages of man,”²⁴ portraying an elderly man and his declining health, energy, and mental state. The action of chimney sweeping becomes a metaphor for sexual activity, as the titular elderly chimney sweep becomes too weak to complete this labor or likewise to perform any sexual activity. He suffers the consequences of a lifetime of difficult manual labor. As an old disabled man, he struggles not only to work, but also to contain youthful sexual desires. His ability to perform

²³ See his contribution to this volume, “Old Age in the World of The Stricker and Other Middle High German Poets.”

²⁴ The different permutations of this medieval notion of the human life cycle have been explored throughout the present volume. For broader discussion reader is referred back to J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

physically and sexually is contrasted to the young, able-bodied man's; the contrast between youthful desire and elderly desire is discussed by Marilyn Sandidge in the chapter on Boccaccio and Chaucer. A secondary thematic emphasis that is pervasive throughout the piece is the male companionship shared by the aging master and his young male servant, who is his apprentice, having worked by his side for years at the back-breaking, sooty task of cleaning chimneys in town. In his master's old age, the apprentice becomes more of a caregiver and servant than a worker completing the tasks of his job, attending to the old man's health, household chores, and daily physical needs.

The chimneysweep says he has been practicing his trade "for over sixty years," making him over seventy years old, we may assume, and therefore in the sixty to seventy-year-old age range that Shulamith Shahar demonstrated as the age group considered "old" in the Middle Ages.²⁵ Description of his body focuses on the physical limitations and features of old age, here resulting in weakness and sexual dysfunction. The *Ramoneur* dialogue consists of a humorous exchange of teasing between the master (the aging disabled person), his wife (the normate), and the apprentice (the youth with a disability). Though the apprentice is fond of his old master and grateful for his position, he also insults the elderly man's age and physical differences by engaging in mockery and witty repartees on the subjects of aging, work, and sexuality. In the role reversal, the dominant older master becomes inferior through derision and mockery of his weaknesses and socially-determined isolation.

At first the trusted servant is prepared to lie to console his master but later feels compelled to tell the truth about his old master's feeble state, inability to find work in his profession, helplessness, and failing sexual health.

In a final example, sharing much in common with the Old French fabliau *topos* of the household power struggle and fabliau structuring device of the ruse, the roughly contemporary *Farce de Goguelu* explores different household hierarchies and master-servant dynamics in the face of old age and disability. Exaggerated verbal *jeux de mots*, physical slapstick humor, and practical jokes center on sight impairment due to old age and take a negative view of the blind head of household. The vulnerability and gifts associated with old age and disability in this period is evident in the comic representation of mistreatment of such figures; throughout the Middle Ages the blind were often marginalized and even physically marginalized or distanced from "normal" society, social relations, and commerce, for instance through the common practice of "cloistering" of the blind, deaf, or mentally ill or mentally disabled.²⁶ In the dialogue and stage directions of

²⁵ Shulamith Shahar, "Who were Old in the Middle Ages?" *Social History of Medicine* 6.3 (1993): 313-41; here 313.

²⁶ Winzer, "Disability and Society before the Eighteenth Century," 89-90.

this farce, the audience witnesses that violent abuse of the disabled master occurs. He also strikes back and hits his female servant. Tensions exist in this household, as the servants attempt to abuse, shun, ignore, or “cloister in the home” their helpless master. It is what would be termed today a “hostile environment,” in which the master is unable to exert his authority or control the behavior of his maid in part due to the physical disability of blindness. The servants test his physical limits, to thereby test his authority, try his patience, and finally question the very social structure of the household.

The *dramatis personae* of *Goguelu* includes: the blind master (referred to metonymically by his sight impairment rather than by his name, as L’Aveugle), the unnamed chambermaid called simply La Chambrière, and the titular hero, Goguelu the valet. The comic exaggeration begins in the opening lines with “Hé! Meseigneurs, par ma conscience / Nous sommes quasi mors de faim” [Sirs, by my conscience, we are nearly dead from hunger] (14–15) when the master is upset by his meal being served late. We discover that the master is blind and that all the servants are disobedient, taking advantage of his disability because he depends on them for chores such as shopping and food preparation. Characterized as old and helpless, the master claims he will die of hunger without the chambermaid’s aid, and depends on her as caretaker for his daily basic needs, for meals, and for moving around. His outcry, however exaggerated and comic, voices perhaps at least a suggestion that some forms of neglect or abuse were being experienced by aging disabled persons within their own homes.

Difference is disruptive in this piece, to the point of violence. The master is hot-tempered, highly emotional, and self-centered, as is his staff. The chambermaid is missing in the opening scene and her seeing-impaired master is unable to find her to force her to cook a meal for him, making him enraged, as revealed by his emotional outbursts in his monologue “Voycy bien grant enragerie” [This is a really great outrage] (20), and violent yet misdirected gestures evident in the slapstick-like movements of the stage directions “En frappant quelqu’ung de son baston” [while hitting one of them with his stick] (27) as he swings around full of rage; the stick is another reference to his blindness and physical impairments. As revenge, the chambermaid assumes her role as household trickster, playing humorous practical jokes on her master to amuse herself, to take advantage of his age and disability, and to challenge his authority and the household hierarchy. When he asks for drink to quench his thirst with a reasonable request, the young servant serves him urine instead of wine as a cruel practical joke, as indicated by the feigned gestures of the graphic stage directions that suggest the performer “fait semblant de pisser dedans” [pretend to urinate into it] (52). This vulgar joke simultaneously represents youthful misunderstanding and disrespect of old age and disability and a challenge to the perhaps oppressive authority and power wielded by the older generation.

In addition to the young maid's own comical challenge to his authority, with the practical joke and with her insults about his blindness and impairments, the valet argues also with and strikes the master as the power structure of the household is turned upside down and servant becomes master (of the other servant and of the master himself). The emotional *discord* (112, 114) of household strife and abuse of the elderly disabled master causes a reversal of roles in the hierarchy of the *ménage*, questioned by both master and servant, when the chambermaid asks "Suis-je point maitresse?" [Am I the mistress?] and the blind master wonders "Et moy maistre?" [And am I master?] (260–61). Disability, old age, and their associated differences are thus images used to call into questions norms, disrupting what is considered normal, and interfering with what is considered household hierarchy and authority or societal status quo. Difference, age, and disability thus overturn normate hierarchy in farce and elsewhere.

The servant suggests as a ruse that he beat the master while she cries as if she herself is being beaten, then she tries to convince the master to play a vulgar, violent game called *broche en cul*. Finally, once they have tricked him again, strung him up in the woods, and beaten him, the master capitulates, "Hélas, Monseigneur, je me rends / A vous, nul mal je ne faisoyz" [Alas, Sir, I surrender myself / To you; I did nothing wrong] (486–87) and "vous m'affollez" [you're driving me mad] (496). As roles are reversed and servants punish the employer, the maid suggests that the master, "Il a receu / Ce croy, bonne discipline" [He got what he deserved, I think] (524–25). Farce characters who are aging and who have disabilities are often similarly described as deserving of punishment; and although this is an exaggerated comic representation of mistreatment the elderly, it once again suggests contemporary negative perceptions or perhaps the possible prevalence of such abuse in society.

Sight and hearing impairments, limited mobility, physical deformities or disfigurement are often at the center of communication, perception, and identity construction in farce interactions. Perceptions of and treatment of persons with disabilities by the cast of normate characters, family, friends, care-givers, as well as dialogue and stage directions, reveal that disability linked to old age in medieval literature paradoxically is at the same time a source of ridicule and respect, misunderstanding and acceptance, disadvantage and advantage. However, much of the extant French farce discourse on age and disability reveals negative perceptions of the time, perceptions and actions that would be qualified as ageism and neglect of the elderly or tantamount to discrimination against the disabled in today's world.

But the aging and impaired bodies in sixteenth-century French farce are nonetheless empowered because such transgressive bodies serve as images of difference, as images that call into question the idea of what was to be considered "normal," in opposition to harsh social perceptions and social realities of old age

and disability. Disability and age are especially disruptive and questioning of norms and normal hierarchies in this period. In contrast to portrayals of aged or disabled characters in later centuries of French theater or narrative, medieval perceptions of the aged disabled person remain largely paradoxical and ambiguous, with disability and age not deemed to be only disadvantages but also forms of difference that call into question the idea of "normal" while they contribute to and enrich society.

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The Good, the Bad, and the Elderly: The Representation of Old Age in Netherlandish Prints (ca. 1550–1650)¹

If you open the seventeenth-century dictionary of proverbs *Nieuwe wijn in oude le'er zacke* (New wine in old caskets) (1636) by Johan de Brune I at the sections *lonckheyd*. *Ouderdom*, *Oud*. *Nieuw* or *Ouderdom* (Youth. Old Age, Old. New or Old Age) you will find a wealth of proverbs about old age which present an ambivalent picture of this stage of life. On the one hand they include proverbs highlighting the good qualities of longevity, like shrewdness gained from lifelong experiences (“Een oude vos, let vry daer op, Niet licht men vanght met net of strop”) (An old fox is sly, and not easily trapped in a net or snare), and on the other hand they portray the negative characteristics of old age like decline and senile decay (“De oudheyd zelfs is anders niet, Als ziect’, en kranckheyd met verdriet”) (Old age is nothing but sickness, ailments and misery).² De Brune’s annotated collection of proverbs *Bankket-werk van goede gedagten* (1660) shows the same ambivalence.³ De Brune’s collected proverbs are just one of many sources in

¹ Translated from the Dutch by Kate Williams. I would like to express my gratitude for her help. I would also like to thank the *Promovendifonds* (Fund for PhD-students) of the Faculty of Arts of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam for the grant to have this article translated.

² Johan de Brune, *Nieuwe Wijn in Oude Le'er-zacke, Bewijzende in Spreek-woorden 'tVernuft der Menschen, ende 'tGheluck van onze Nederlandsche Tael* (Middelburg: Zacharias Roman, 1636), 251–57, 456; here 253.

³ Johan de Brune, *Bankket-werk van Goede Gedagten*, 2 vol. (Middelburg: Jaques Fierens, 1657, 1660). For De Brune’s work, see Paula Koning, “Spreekwoorden als Bouwstenen,” *Johan de Brune de Oude (1588–1658): Een Zeeuws Literator en Staatsman in de Zeventiende Eeuw*, ed. Piet Verkruisje (Middelburg: Koninklijk Zeeuwsch Genootschap der Wetenschappen, 1990), 92–106. For sixteenth-century proverb books with references to old age, see: *Kamper Spreekwoorden: Naar de Uitgave van Warnersen anno 1550*, ed. Gesinus Kloeke (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1959); Willy Louis Braekman, “Rethoricaal Orakelboek op Rijn,” *Jaarboek Koninklijke Soevereine Hoofdkamer van Retorica 'De Fonteyne' te Gent* 31 (1980–1981): 5–36; here nos. 44, 76, 90, 133, 149, 183, 225, 351; Symon Andriessoon, *Duytse Adagia ofte Spreekwoorden*, Antwerp, Heynrick Alssens, 1550, ed. Mark Meadow and Anna Fleurkens (Hilversum: Verloren, 2003), nos. 74.1, 79.4–5, 79.6.1, 92.5, 94.1, 97.4, 97.4.1.

which contradictory—and stereotype—observations about old age are expressed. As the introduction and other contributions to the collection in question show, contrasting stock themes on the subject of old age have existed alongside one another for centuries.

How these polar and parallel views of old age can be accounted for, and in which context they should be placed, is far from clear. In this paper I would like to discuss three frameworks of interpretation. These are closely related to the context in which the varying topoi relating to old age function. The conclusions result from my study of the dominant themes governing old age in Netherlandish prints (woodcuts, etchings, engravings) between approximately 1550 and 1650.⁴ My study was based on a wide selection of individual prints, series of prints, book illustrations, and *picturae* (illustrations) from emblem books. In these works many of the same themes recur that we also see in the literary sources. Images of old age can be roughly divided into two kinds: positive themes in which mental strength plays a central role and negative themes in which the worldly and the physical predominate. On the one hand the former are themes involving piety, modesty, wisdom and experience, and the latter miserliness, greed, lust, and unequal love. In addition to these there are also negatively loaded themes not directed at censurable behavior on the part of the old people themselves, but dealing with young people's lack of respect for the older generation. There are also representations in which physical and mental decline play a major role, relating to the desire to die and the confrontation with one's conscience.

The reason for taking prints as the starting point is that they were the most important means of pictorial communication in early modern times. The fact that prints were produced in great numbers, were easy to transport, small in size, and low in price meant that they were distributed over a large area and were seen by great numbers of people. The center of production from approximately 1550 to 1600 was Antwerp. After this town was conquered by the Spaniards in 1585—and particularly from 1600 onwards—the production centers moved to Haarlem, Amsterdam, and The Hague. However, the centers of production do not necessarily determinate the distribution area. There was a lively trade in prints within the Netherlands; and the *Frankfurt Buchmesse*—held twice a year—was another way in which those making prints could sell their products on a grand scale to an international, West-European public. Therefore prints have contributed

⁴ Anouk Janssen, *Grijsaards in Zwart-wit: De Verbeelding van de Ouderdom in de Nederlandse Prentkunst (1550–1650)* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2007). Most of the prints mentioned in the footnotes of this paper are reproduced in that book, a selection of which will also accompany this article. See also Anouk Janssen, "The Iconography of Old Age and Rembrandt's Early Work," *Rembrandt's Mother: Myth and Reality*. Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Christiaan Vogelaar, G. Korevaar (Leiden: Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal; Zwolle: Waanders, 2005), 53–66.

more to the dissemination of ideas on old age than paintings. An added bonus in their favor was that printing offers a wealth of material, due to the many (serial) images of the ages of man. Moreover, the amalgamation of picture and text (Neo-Latin, German, French and/or Dutch) found in many prints provides a great range of text traditions and trends that have enabled us to explain the images.⁵ Painting and printing are often related in terms of iconography, and for this reason the conclusions about the representation of old age in printing can also serve as a starting point for research into the way this stage of life is represented in painting.⁶ No matter what the period, art historians have carried out far less research than literary scholars and historians on this dual image of old age.⁷

Publications on the representation of old age in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Netherlandish printing and painting are extremely rare. The only study to take old age as its main subject is the exhibition catalogue *Bilder vom alten Menschen in der niederländischen und deutschen Kunst 1550–1750* (*Paintings of Old People in Netherlandish and German Art 1550–1750*) from 1993.⁸ Thomas Döring established in his essay that a contradictory picture was painted of old age. He also argues that the pictorial representations are not an unfiltered portrayal of reality.⁹ Among others, he bases his argument on Carsten-Peter Warncke's essay on old age in emblems and on the essay by Wayne Franits on old age in genre representations (everyday scenes).¹⁰ Warncke recognizes a "Doppelgeschichte des Alters" (Duality of Old Age). Franits, who quite rightly links this duality with the representation of vices and virtues, also points to the continuity of the traditional character of

⁵ Clifford S. Ackley, *Printmaking in the Age of Rembrandt* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1980); Nadine Orenstein et al., "Print Publishers in the Netherlands 1580–1620," *Dawn of the Golden Age: Northern Netherlandish Art 1580–1620*. Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Ger Luijten (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum; Zwolle: Waanders, 1993), 167–200; David Landau and Peter Parshall, *The Renaissance Print 1470–1550* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

⁶ See for instance Sophie Bostock's contribution in this volume.

⁷ General surveys are Patrick L. MacKee and Heta Kauppinen, *The Art of Aging: A Celebration of Old Age in Western Art* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1987); Herbert C. Covey, *Images of Older People in Western Art* (New York: Praeger, 1991). For a recent, but insufficient article about the two visions on old age in art, see Uta Barbara Ullrich, "Zwischen Würdigung und Diffamierung: Rollenbilder des Alters in der Grafik um 1500," *Dürers Mutter: Schönheit, Alter und Tod im Bild der Renaissance*. Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Michael Roth and Uta Barbara Ullrich (Berlin: Kupferstichkabinett Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2006), 95–100.

⁸ *Bilder vom alten Menschen in der niederländischen und deutschen Kunst 1550–1750: Ausstellung im Herzog Anton-Ulrich-Museum Braunschweig, 14. Dezember 1993 bis 20. Februar 1994*. Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Ursel Berger, Jutta Desel, Thomas Döring, Beatrice Marnetté-Kühl (Braunschweig: Herzog Anton-Ulrich-Museum, 1993).

⁹ Thomas Döring, "Bilder vom alten Menschen: Anmerkungen zu Themen, Funktionen, Ästhetik," *Bilder vom alten Menschen*, 17–36; here 21–23.

¹⁰ Wayne Franits, "Zwischen Frömmigkeit und Geiz: Das Alter in Genredarstellungen," *Bilder vom alten Menschen*, 78–86; Carsten Peter Warncke, "Das Alter in der Emblematik," *Bilder vom alten Menschen*, 52–59; here 57.

dual representation and thinks that in doing so he has suitably explained the paradox, though we cannot yet be absolutely sure about that.¹¹ The findings from this interesting catalogue have rarely been used by literary scholars or by historians. At the same time the catalogue has not yet utilized the insights of an authority on old age, such as the historian Pat Thane, simply because it was published too early.

From the early 1990s Thane has been one of the first to make it clear that the most predominant characteristic in representations of old age is a juxtaposition of opposing images, and furthermore, that the great strength of the continuity of this dualism can be traced back to antiquity.¹² Along with other old-age researchers she has become increasingly convinced that positive and negative images of old people have not alternated over the centuries but have actually existed alongside one another.¹³ Another important observation is that the image presented of old age in representations and opinions formulated on the subject in various texts are not necessarily a direct reflection of social reality, therefore they are not necessarily the way in which old age was experienced by old people themselves nor do they reflect how old people were actually treated. These images certainly did not come about as a direct result of perceptions of daily life, even though there is a correlation; instead they were mainly formed by age-old traditions. Old age is mainly represented by topoi, literary and visual clichés that are essential to literary and pictorial practices.¹⁴

¹¹ Franits, "Zwischen Frömmigkeit und Geiz," 84.

¹² Pat Thane, "Old Age in English History," *Zur Kulturgeschichte des Alterns*, ed. Christoph Conrad and Hans-Joachim von Konratowitz (Berlin: Deutsches Zentrum für Altersfragen, 1993), 17–37; Pat Thane, *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane, "Introduction," "Bibliographical Essay," *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500*, ed. Lynn A. Botelho and Pat Thane (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 1–12 and 232–38, respectively.

¹³ Judith de Luce, "Continuity and Change: Four Disciplinary Perspectives on Reading Cicero's *De Senectute*," *Journal of Aging Studies* 7 (1993): 335–81; here 378; Joel Rosenthal, *Old Age in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 178; Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 6, 31, 64–65; Lynn Botelho, "Old Age and Menopause in Rural Women of Early Northern Suffolk," *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500*, ed. Lynn A. Botelho and Pat Thane (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 43–65; here 43 and 45; Tim Parkin, *Old Age in the Roman World: A Cultural and Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 57–59.

¹⁴ Herman Pleij, "Taakverdeling in het Huwelijk: Over Literatuur en Sociale Werkelijkheid in de Late Middeleeuwen," *Literatuur* 3 (1986): 66–76; Ilja Veldman, "Iets over de Historische Relevantie van Beeldmateriaal," *Geschiedenis buiten de Perken: De Waarde van de Geschiedwetenschap voor Andere Wetenschappen, Politiek en Beleid en Cultuur*, ed. Jan Willem ter Avest (Leiden: Stichting Leidschrift, 1989), 85–97; David Troyansky, "The Older Person in the Western World: From the Middle Ages to the Industrial Revolution," *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*, ed. Thomas R. Cole, David Dirck van Tassel, Robert Kastenbaum (New York: Springer, 1992), 40–61; here 40, 48; Rosenthal, *Old Age*, 5, 172, 187–88; Shulamith Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: 'Winter clothes us in Shadow and Pain'*, transl. Yael Lotan (1995; London: Routledge, 1997), 76; Yvonne Bleyerveld, *Hoe Bedrieftelijk*

Thane's work culminated in 2005 when she edited her book *The Long History of Old Age*.¹⁵ The publication's many illustrations may have given readers the impression that it is mainly about the depiction of old age, although the amount of attention that is paid to this topic varies according to the writer, or writers, of each individual chapter. Most of the chapters are of a historical or literary nature. Moreover there are a few erroneous, faulty, and misleading legends, so it seems that no separate art-historical research into the illustrations was undertaken for the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the seventeenth century. The most important conclusions regarding the representation of old age, largely based on textual material, are still relevant, however, for art history. For instance, as a reaction to the older views expressed by authors like Georges Minois, Tim Parkin quite rightly states: "That a range of views about old age and elderly people is held in the modern world does not surprise us; neither should we expect anything other than that a wide range of images, attitudes and ideas about ageing and older people survive from classical antiquity."¹⁶ Shulamith Shahar adds to this: "attitudes and image were constantly veering between the 'positive' and the 'negative'."¹⁷

In an attempt not only to acknowledge this duality but also to explain it, Thane has pointed out the importance of the ages-of-man traditions, also called the traditions of the *cursus aetatis*, or *cursus vitae*. Herein a distinction can be made between 'Green Old Age' and 'Decrepitude,' the first stage of old age that is characterized by positive qualities and the second stage of old age that is typified by senile decay.¹⁸ There are publications on the ages-of-man traditions in their entirety, but within the context of the history of old age not much further research has been carried out on the way in which old age is represented within these traditions. This paper and the one written by Harry Peters, also included in this volume, are an exception to the rule, and in my own dissertation I have focused

dat die Vrouwen zijn: Vrouwenlisten in de Beeldende Kunst in de Nederlanden circa 1350–1650 (Leiden: Primavera Pers, 2000); Parkin, *Old Age*, 58–59; *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe; Cultural Representations*, ed. Erin Campbell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 1. Editor's note: Martha Peacock, in the article following Janssen's, argues from the opposite perspective, but not necessarily in contradiction, since both approaches to these art works are possible, realistic, and verifiable.

¹⁵ *The Long History of Old Age*, ed. Pat Thane (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005). The book is also published as *A History of Old Age*, ed. Pat Thane (Los Angeles: Getty Trust Publications).

¹⁶ Tim Parkin, "The Ancient Greek and Roman Worlds," *The Long History of Old Age*, 31–69; here 31.

¹⁷ Shulamith Shahar, "The Middle Ages and Renaissance," *The Long History of Old Age*, 71–111; here 111.

¹⁸ Pat Thane, "Old Age in English History," 31–33; Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 4, 56, 64–65. For remarks in this direction, see also Edward Bever, "Old Age and Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe," *Old Age in Preindustrial Society*, ed. Peter Stearns (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982), 150–90; here 166.

a great deal on these traditions, both on texts, and on the images in which these ideas are expressed.¹⁹

I would like to add an important, coordinating framework of interpretation to the first and second stages of old age: the rhetorical traditions of praise and blame. In addition to this I will demonstrate that the positive and negative images of old age can also be considered in a moralizing framework, namely within the framework of the *exempla* and the *exempla contraria*. I shall discuss these three, sometimes overlapping, frameworks of interpretation by means of textual traditions that I shall link with pictorial traditions from the dominant positive and negative old-age themes taken from Netherlandish printing between approximately 1550 and 1650.

Ages-of-Man Traditions

The textual and pictorial traditions relating to the ages of man originated in antiquity and were rediscovered, adjusted or renewed in the Middle Ages, from whence they found their way into early-modern representations.²⁰ The literary and pictorial sources of the ages of man are important channels for the dissemination of ideas and pictorial conventions governing old age—and other stages of life. Early-modern surveys of ages-of-man theories can be found, among others, in the *Silva de varia lección* (1542) by the Spaniard Pedro Mexia (ca. 1496–ca. 1552) and in

¹⁹ Janssen, *Grijsaards in Zwart-wit*, ch. 1, par. 3 and ch. 2.

²⁰ Anton Englert, "Die menschlichen Altersstufen in Wort und Bild," *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde* 17 (1907), 16–42; Franz Boll, "Die Lebensalter: Ein Beitrag zur antiken Ethologie und zur Geschichte der Zahlen mit einem Anhang 'Zur Schrift Peri Hesdomadon'," *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum Geschichte und Deutsche Literatur* 130 (1913), 89–145; Hans von der Gabelentz, *Die Lebensalter und das menschliche Leben in Tiergestalt* (Berlin: E. Steiniger, 1938); Samuel Claggett Chew, *The Pilgrimage of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962); *Die Lebenstreppe: Bilden der menschlichen Lebensalter: Eine Ausstellung des Landschaftsverbandes Rheinland, Rheinisches Museumsamt, Brauweiler in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Städtischen Museum Haus Koekkoek, Kleve*, Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Peter Joerisse, Cornelia Will (Cologne: Rheinland-Verlag, 1983); James Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986); Elizabeth Sears, *The Ages of Man: Medieval Interpretations of the Life Cycle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Korine Hazelzet, *De Levenstrap* (Zwolle: Catena, 1994); Klaus Wirag, "Cursus Aetatis: Lebensalterdarstellungen vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhunderts," Ph.D. dissertation, Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, 1995.

Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593).²¹ Mexia's book is an encyclopedia, which first appeared in a Dutch translation in 1587 under the title *De verscheyden lessen*. This translation was reprinted eight times—the last reprint appearing in 1617. The importance of the book is also indicated by the number of French translations: between 1552 and 1643 no less than thirteen French editions saw the light of day.²² Ripa's *Iconologia* is an encyclopedic work in which concepts and ideas are described as allegorical figures and are sometimes explained and accompanied by illustrations. This iconographic handbook enjoyed great popularity and quite a few artists made use of it. The first, an Italian version, appeared in 1593, followed by nine more extended works. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century the book appeared in no fewer than eight languages. The Amsterdam book printer, poet, and prose writer Dirck Pietersz Pers is responsible for the first Dutch translation dating back to 1644. He bases this *Iconologia of uytbeeldingen des verstands* on the Italian edition of 1624/1625 and the 1630 edition.²³

The ages-of-man theories are based on a principle that Cicero denoted as the principle of *tempestivitas*, season-related or age-related qualities: each stage of life having its own exclusive characteristics.²⁴ What suits the elderly does not by definition suit the young, and vice versa. Moreover, a characteristic of the ages-of-man theories is that they are based on astrological, numerical or medicinal blueprints. Life is divided up into three to twelve stages, and the length of each

²¹ Pedro Mexia, *De Verscheyden Lessen van Petri Messiae* (Amsterdam: Pieter Jacobsz. Paets, 1617), book 1, ch. 41 [40], 174–80; Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia of Uytbeeldingen des Verstands*, transl. Dirck Pietersz. Pers (Amsterdam: Dirck Pietersz. Pers, 1644), 290–91 (*Vita Humana, Het Menschlijk Leven*), 395–98 (*Eta in generale, D'Ouder in 't gemeen*). See also the survey of three theories about the life cycle in Willem Goeree, *Natuurlijk en Schilderkonstig Ontwerp der Menschkunde* (Amsterdam: Willem Goeree, 1682), 56–58.

²² The Dutch editions are from 1587, 1588, 1595, 1607, 1613, 1615, 1616, 1617. For the French translations, see Don Cameron Allen, "Jacques' 'Seven Ages' and Pedro Mexia," *Modern Language Notes* 56 (1941): 601–03; here 602. For an English edition from 1571 by van Thomas Fortescue, see Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 50–51. For a German edition from 1564, see Wirag, "Cursus Aetatis," 27.

²³ Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia of Uytbeeldingen des Verstands*, ed. Jochen Becker (Soest: Davaco, 1971), I, IV.

²⁴ Cicero, *Over Ouderdom en Vriendschap*, transl. Wilhemus Antonius Maria Peters (Amsterdam: Ambo, 1999), *Over Ouderdom*, ch. 10, par. 33. See also Aristotle, *Rhetorica*, transl. Marc Huys (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 2004), book 2, ch. 12–14; Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, transl. Frank Eggleston Robbins (London: Heinemann, 1948), book 4, ch. 10; Horatius, *Verzamelde Gedichten*, transl. Piet Schrijvers (Groningen: Historische Uitgeverij, 2003), *Ars Poetica*, vs. 114–18; 156–57, 176–78; Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Brieven aan Lucilius*, transl. Cornelus Verhoeven (Baarn: Ambo, 1990), no. 4, par. 1–2; no. 36, par. 4; no. 121, par. 15–16; Dante, *Il Convivio (The Banquet)*, transl. Richard H. Lansing (New York: Garland, 1990), book 4, ch. 24 and 27; Michel de Montaigne, *Essays*, transl. Frank de Graaff (Amsterdam: Boom, 1993), book 2, ch. 28; Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 1–3, 7, 150–52; Sears, *The Ages of Man*, 104; Thomas M. Falkner and Judith de Luce, "A View from Antiquity: Greece, Rome, and Elders," *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging*, ed. Thomas R. Cole, David Dirck van Tassel, Robert Kastenbaum (New York: Springer, 1992), 3–39; here 19.

stage, and thus the entire course of life varies according to the theory. Sometimes the exact length of the stages is not even indicated within any one theory.

Many stages-of-life theories are based on the analogical view of the world that served right up to the early-modern period.²⁵ In this world view there is still no division between astrology, astronomy, and medicine and it is assumed that the microcosm (man) and the macrocosm (the world surrounding man) are connected and can be compared to one another. Thus the ages of man may amount to as few as four periods, analogous to the four seasons, temperaments, or elements, but also to seven, analogous to the seven planets, or as many as twelve, analogous to the twelve months. According to the analogical way of thinking old age can be associated with the winter months due to its cold nature (melancholic or phlegmatic), the elements earth (cold and dry), or water (cold and damp) and the planet Saturn, considered to be the coldest planet as it is farthest away from the sun. Dividing the course of life into ten times ten years, without analogy, was very appealing for a long period of time; the early-modern versions of this are based on two medieval rhyme traditions. In one of these each stage of life is compared to an animal.²⁶

No matter how many stages it takes to complete a life, nor how long or short each of these stages might be, all stages-of-life theories show the same recognizable, generalizing, and stereotype image. This can be traced back to Aristotle's basic system that divided life into three stages: growth, heyday, and decline.²⁷ Dante compared this basic system to an arch.²⁸ Old age in his system is equivalent to decline and fall. In many ages-of-man theories this stage is described as the one in which it is downhill all the way. In the view of Galenus or Hippocrates old people's physical and mental decline was attributed to their

²⁵ Sometimes this is also referred to as the Aristotelian world view. The comments on this world view are based on Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (Londen: Nelson, 1964), 3–15; Ilja Veldman, "De Macht van de Planeten over het Mensdom in Prenten naar Maarten de Vos," *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 31 (1983): 21–53; here 21–27, 38–39; Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 12–15, 37–38; Sears, *The Ages of Man*, 9–37; Gerlinde Lütke Notarp, *Von Heiterkeit, Zorn, Schwermut und Lethargie: Studien zur Ikonographie der vier Temperamente in der niederländischen Serien- und Genregraphik des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts* (Münster: Waxman, 1998), 36–47; Tabitta van Nouhuys, *The Age of the Two-Faced Janus: The Comets of 1577 and 1618 and the Decline of the Aristotelian World View in the Netherlands* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 93–104; Erik Jorink, *Wetenschap en Wereldbeeld in de Gouden Eeuw* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1999), 12–23; Boudewijn Bakker, *Landschapen Wereldbeeld van Van Eyck tot Rembrandt* (Bussum: Thoth, 2004), 51–52, 61–65, 229–30. Though the analogous view of the world gradually declined in importance in the seventeenth century, the study of medicine was still based on the principle of the four temperaments.

²⁶ Von der Gabelentz, *Die Lebensalter; Die Lebenstreppe*, 61–71; Sears, *The Ages of Man*, 154; Hazelzet, *De Levenstrap*, 19–20, 44–47; Wirag, "Cursus Aetatis," 206–9.

²⁷ For comparable commentary see: Mexia, *De Verscheyden Lessen*, book 1, ch. 41 [40], 176, 179; Ripa, *Iconologia*, 395; 397; Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 20–51.

²⁸ Dante, *Il Convivio*, book 4, ch. 23–24; Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 32–35; Sears, *The Ages of Man*, 103–04.

melancholic or phlegmatic temperament. This led to the skin wrinkling and the body cooling, creating a need for warmth. Melancholy and phlegm could also be the cause of sleepiness, slowness, and lust, as well as being held responsible for bringing on greed and depression. As we shall see later on, the melancholy temperament had a totally different side to it as well. Ingenuity, studiousness and scholarship were also a direct outcome of melancholy.²⁹

Pictorial sources which have given the ages-of-man theories a contour include medieval wheels-of-life and fifteenth-century and sixteenth-century prints with ten stages of life. From the middle of the sixteenth century series of prints were made showing the stages of life too, the so-called 'ages-of-man series', and prints showing the steps of life.³⁰ In ages-of-man series the figures on each print of the series depict one stage of life, whereas on the steps-of-life version the ten ages of man are often depicted in one scene, as figures on an arch or steps which first rise then descend (ill. 1).³¹ The Netherlandish ages-of-man series were made between approximately 1560 and 1600 and frequently reprinted in the seventeenth century. They show four, six, seven, and ten ages of man and in many cases an analogy is represented, for instance between the course of life and the four seasons, the four temperaments, or the seven planets. The series only depict the life of men, whereas a few German and Swiss series representing the ten ages of man also have versions depicting women.³² The earliest steps of life come from Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands and date from the middle of the sixteenth century.³³ From the 1620s

²⁹ Lütke Notarp, *Von Heiterkeit*, ch. 4 and 5.

³⁰ The ages of life also appear in paintings, see e.g. Jan Lievens's series of the four elements, which also depict the four seasons and the stages of life: *Jan Lievens: Ein Maler im Schatten Rembrandts: Ausstellung im Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum Braunschweig vom 6. September bis 11. November 1979*, Exhibition Catalogue, ed. R. Klessman, (Braunschweig: Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, 1979), no. 2–5; *The Mystery of the Young Rembrandt*, Exhibition Catalogue, Ernst van de Wetering, Bernard Schnackenburg (Kassel: Staatliche Museen Kassel, 2001), no. 72–73.

³¹ Steps of life, published by Claes Jansz. Visscher. See also the companion piece: steps of life of a woman: Friedrich Wilhelm Heinrich Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings Engravings and Woodcuts ca.1450–1700* (Amsterdam: Van Gendt & Co, 1949–1987); Roosendaal: Koninklijke Van Poll, 1988–1994; Rotterdam: Sound and Vision Interactive, 1995–2004), vol. 38 and 38, no. 215; Maurits de Meyer, *De Volks-en Kinderprent in de Nederlanden van de 15e tot de 20e eeuw* (Antwerpen: Standaard Uitgeverij, 1962), 323, 395; *Die Lebenstreppe*, no. 12–13; Hazelzet, *De Levenstrap*, 8–10.

³² Two German series are for instance made by Jost Amman: *The New Hollstein German Engravings, Etchings and Woodcuts, 1400–1700: Jost Amman Book Illustrations*, ed. Gero Seelig and Giulia Bartrum (Rotterdam: Sound and Vision Publishers, 2003), vol. 7, no. 169.143–69.156; vol. 10, no. 285, 119–285, 138.

³³ Steps of life by Jörg de Breu II, 1540: Friedrich Wilhelm Heinrich Hollstein, *German Engravings, Etchings and Woodcuts ca. 1400–1700* (Amsterdam: Herzberger, 1954–), vol. 4, no. 30; Chew, *The Pilgrimage of Life*, 148; *Die Lebenstreppe*, no. 1; Hazelzet, *De Levenstrap*, 16–17. Steps of life by Cornelis Anthonisz., c. 1540–1550: Wouter Nijhoff, *Nederlandsche Houtsneden, 1500–1550: Reproducties van Oude Noord- en Zuid Nederlandsche Houtsneden op Losse Bladen met en zonder Tekst in de Oorspronkelijke Grootte* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1931–1939), no. 214–15; Maurits de Meyer, *Volksprenten in de Nederlanden*

onwards, in particular, the steps of life became the favorite way of portraying the course of a person's life and there were both men's and women's stairways – and even a few where men and women were shown together.

It was the lucidity of the concept that undoubtedly contributed to the success of the steps of life. After all, the shape of the steps of life mirrors the appealing Aristotelian basic system that Dante specified as being an arch. Willem Goeree (1635–1711) wrote in his handbook for artists (1682) that the division of life into ten times ten was only considered by very few people to be realistic, but that “'d' Afteykening daar van by na in yders Huys een Plaatsje aan de Wand bekleed” (it [probably the steps of life] was depicted on the wall in almost everyone's house).³⁴

In many representations of the ages of man the relationship between old age, the winter, and the cold phlegmatic or melancholy temperament is expressed in varying pictorial motifs. An old man or woman is often shown wearing a fur coat or fur hat sitting near a fire behind a grate, eating a stodgy wintertime meal, in a wintry landscape or next to a bare tree, and sometimes with a patently obvious melancholy pose, resting his or her head on an arm. Warm clothing is one of the most persistent motifs, which continues to recur even beyond representations of the stages of man.³⁵ On the steps of life the two trees on either side of the steps are also a reference to seasonal iconography (ill. 1).

One example of a print from an ages-of-man series in which the sadness of old age plays a central role can be found in the last print of a series of four ages of man by Raphael Sadeler I after Maarten de Vos from 1591, titled ‘Dolor’ (Sorrow) (Ill. 2).³⁶ It depicts a bent-down old man who according to the legend is ‘already leading a half-buried, miserable life.’ His only contact is with doctors and the highest judge (God), and he would like nothing better than to die.³⁷ Hanging on

1400–1900: *Religieuze, Allegorische, Satirische en Verhalende Prenten, Speelkaarten, Ganzen-en Uilenborden, Driekoningenbriefjes, Nieuwjaarsprenten* (Amsterdam: Scheltema & Holkema, 1970), 89; *Die Lebenstreppe*, no. 2; *Kunst voor de beeldenstorm*, Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Jan Piet Filedt Kok, Willy Halsema-Kubes, Wouter Kloek ('s-Gravenhage: Staatsuitgeverij, 1986), no. 156; Christine Megan Armstrong, *The Moralizing Prints of Cornelis Anthonisz.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 81–84; Hazelzet, *De Levenstrap*, 17–19. Steps of life of man and woman by Cristofano Bertelli, c. 1560: Chew, *The Pilgrimage of Life*, 148; *Die Lebenstreppe*, 17–18, 33–34; Hazelzet, *De Levenstrap*, 16.

³⁴ Goeree, *Natuurlijk en Schilderkonstig Ontwerp*, 58.

³⁵ Anouk Janssen, “Oud en koud: Ouderdom als de Winter van het Leven in de Nederlandse Prentkunst uit de Zestiende en Zeventiende Eeuw,” *Kunstlicht* 24 (2003): 3–8; Janssen, *Grijsaards in Zwart-wit*, ch. 2, par. 2.2.

³⁶ Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 44 and 46, no. 1465; *Bilder vom alten Menschen*, no. 98; ‘Der Welt Lauf’: *Allegorische Graphikserien des Manierismus*. Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Hans Martin Kaulbach, Reinhart Schleier (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje, 1997), 93.

³⁷ ‘Nunc mihi cum Medicis res est, et Iudice summo, / Et misere vitam semisepultus ago. / Rixosae investant vetulae, execrabile vulgus, / Invidus in terrae parva recondo sinum. / Scilicet exactum est, et inevitabile fatum / Imminet, atque aliam me monet ire viam. / Nil praeter vilis Dominum, libitina

the wall in his house is a painting of the Last Judgment, an omen of what is about to happen. To the left, a woman is burying a share of his belongings to make sure that her portion is safe.³⁸

Sometimes the wish to die is not caused by the physical ailments that come with old age alone, but also by the lack of respect shown to the older generation by their offspring. If they are badgered by their children or grandchildren, old people would often prefer to die. Representations of this theme can be found in the series of prints showing the ten ages of man. In the two early Netherlandish series from around 1572–1575 the medieval theme of ‘children’s mockery’ is still depicted in the traditional way by two children jeering at an old man.³⁹ In the second series from around 1600 the theme is developed further. In the eighth picture (80 years of age) from a series by Assuerus van Londerseel after Nicolaes de Bruyn we see how the old man has been placed next to the fireplace by himself and is not allowed to eat with his adult children (ill. 3).⁴⁰ Meanwhile he is also being badgered by two of his grandchildren. In the ninth picture (90 years of age) it is even worse: the old man is being threatened by his son with a cudgel, and the son and grandson have spanned a cord in front of his feet so that he will trip over it and die (ill. 4).⁴¹ It becomes clear in the last picture (100 years old) that they have an eye on the inheritance, as it shows the beneficiaries around the man’s deathbed, fighting over their portion.⁴²

The motif of the son attacking his old father with a cudgel is one that plays a major role in various traditions. According to a folkloristic story about the

frequentat, / Et tantorum operum fida ministra venit’. Translation Wil van Wageningen.

³⁸ Compare the so called ‘Greisenklage’ in the song book of Clara Hätzlerin from 1471: *Liederbuch der Clara Hätzlerin*, ed. Carl Haltaus. Mit einem Nachwort von Hanns Fischer. Deutsche Neudrucke. Reihe: Texte des Mittelalters (1840; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1966), 41–42, no. 30. See page 398 for the word ‘Greisenklage’; see also I. Knor, “Von der skriptographischen zur typographischen Textüberlieferung: Etappen der Realisierung von Schrift und Visualität in der spätmittelalterlichen Greisenklage,” *Das illustrierte Flugblatt in der Kultur der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Wolfgang Harms and Michael Schilling (Frankfurt: Lang, 1998), 59–73; see also Albrecht Classen, *Deutsche Liederbücher des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*. Volksliedstudien, 1 (Münster, New York, Munich, and Berlin: Waxmann, 2001), ch. 10.

³⁹ Gerard van Groeningen, *Eighty-Year-Old Man: The New Hollstein: Dutch and Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts ca. 1450–1700: Gerard van Groeningen*, ed. Christiaan Schuckman and Ger Luijten (Roosendaal and Rotterdam: Sound and Vision Interactive, 1997) vol. 1, no. 1. Anonymous after Maarten de Vos, *Ninety-Year-Old Man: Hollstein, Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 44 and 46, no. 1476.

⁴⁰ Assuerus van Londerseel after Nicolaes de Bruyn: Hollstein, *Eighty-Year-Old Man: Hollstein, Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 4, no. 207. This series is based on a series which was made by Crispijn de Passe before or in 1599: Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 15, no. 478–87.

⁴¹ Assuerus van Londerseel after Nicolaes de Bruyn, *Ninety-Year-Old Man: Hollstein, Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 4, no. 208.

⁴² Assuerus van Londerseel after Nicolaes de Bruyn, *Hundred-Year-Old Man: Hollstein, Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 4, no. 209.

Teutons, sons were said to have the right to cudgel their fathers to death when they had reached the age of 70.⁴³ This is a variation of the Roman proverb 'sexagenarios de ponte': 'sixty-year-olds off the bridge'.⁴⁴ Likewise the cudgel appears in the medieval proverb that is also mentioned in Albrecht Classen's contribution to this volume, namely that people deserve to be clubbed if they have spoilt their children.⁴⁵ This would seem to be equally applicable to the two series from which the above-mentioned prints are taken. From the preceding prints in the series it appears that in the past the father has given his children many gifts and therefore has only himself to blame for their overindulged behavior.

This subject matter is also touched upon in the satirical homily *Das Narrenschiff* (1494) by Sebastian Brant, which was published in a Dutch translation with the same woodcuts in 1548 titled *Der sotten schip*.⁴⁶ The chapter *Ere vatter und mutter*—about the commandment which states that children should honor their parents—contains a woodcut showing an old man in a fool's cap and a pouch full of money placed opposite a young man and a young woman menacing him with cudgels (ill. 5).⁴⁷ The fool's cap is a symbol of the folly of the old man who has given his children too much in the past. This picture portrays both the generosity of the parent as well as the unwished-for consequences: the lack of respect shown by these spoilt children who would preferably rid themselves of their parent. Brant's text clarifies the action in the scene by, on the one hand, making reference to the message from *Ecclesiasticus* (*Sirach*) 33:19–23 (parents should not be too generous toward their children and should maintain their independence from them), but on the other hand reprimanding the children for ignoring the fifth

⁴³ Elfriede Moser-Rath, "Altentötung," *Enzyklopädie des Märchens: Handwörterbuch zur historischen und vergleichenden Erzählforschung*, ed. Kurt Ranke and Hermann Bausinger (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1977), vol. 1, 388–95; Pieter van Thiel, "Poor Parents, Rich Children and Family Saying Grace: Two Related Aspects of the Iconography of Late Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century Dutch Domestic Morality," *Simiolus* 17 (1987): 90–149; here 102.

⁴⁴ Desiderius Erasmus, *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1969–2005), vol. 2, bd. 1, *Adagia*, no. 437; Parkin, *Old Age*, 259–72.

⁴⁵ See also Van Thiel "Poor Parents," 102; Pat Thane, "The Age of Old Age," *The Long History of Old Age*, ed. Pat Thane (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 9–29; here, 10, 12.

⁴⁶ Sebastian Brant, *Das Narrenschiff* (Basel, 1494); Sebastian Brant, *Der Sotten Schip* (Antwerp, 1548). The first Dutch translation was published in 1500.

⁴⁷ Brant, *Das Narrenschiff*, ch. 90. Used for the illustration is Brant, *Narrensch[h]iff* (Basel, 1506), ch. 89. This edition has the same woodcuts, but some chapters have different numbers. For Brant's book and other fools literature, see *Over Wilden en Narren, Boeren en Bedelaars: Beeld van de Andere, Vertoog over het Zelf*, Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Paul Vandenbroeck (Antwerp: Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 1987), 22–34.

commandment (Honor thy father and thy mother).⁴⁸ This double-edged criticism also provides the foundation for the theme 'poor parents—rich children' that is represented in Netherlandish prints and paintings from around 1590.⁴⁹ The crux of this theme relates to parents who have given too much to their children earlier on which has led to their own destitution in old age. When their rich children are asked for help later on they are unwilling to assist them. In the 1628 edition of the *Houwelyck* by Cats an illustration of the theme by Van de Venne has been added (ill. 6).⁵⁰ The foolishness of the indulging behavior of the old parents is represented by the fool standing behind them. The personification of Death on the left side, behind the rich children, is added as symbol of *vanitas*.

As Thane indicated, this negative profile of old age in the ages-of-man theories exists alongside a positive image of old age. This does not, however, apply to all theories. In a life that comprises three or four stages old age follows straight after adulthood and it is only in more refined definitions that this descent can be broken down even further. These allow more room for differentiation and for the declining years to be described in gradations. Illustrative of this is the theory based on Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* (second century C.E.), the analogy between the course of a person's life and the seven planets. The penultimate stage in the aging process (from 56 to 68 years of age) is compared to Jupiter and is characterized by spiritual maturity and caution. The last stage in the aging process (from 68 to death) is compared to Saturn and is distinguished by decline and weariness of life.⁵¹ For instance, in Netherlandish prints there is one series showing this analogy in which the strict distinction between a positive first stage and a negative second stage can be clearly identified. This is a series by Adriaen Collaert after Maarten de Vos from 1581, with first a picture of a wise and sensible old man who is represented as a judge (ill. 7), followed by a picture showing an old man who in the face of death is goaded by his conscience (ill. 8).⁵²

⁴⁸ For examples of images of the 'poor parents—rich children' theme in which the parents are threatened by a stick, see Van Thiel, "Poor Parents", no. I.A.1, I.A.1.a, I.A.1.b, II.4. In later versions Death or another allegorical figure holds on to the stick and is trying to hit the children, not the parents.

⁴⁹ Peter van Thiel, "Poor Parents"; Korine Hazelzet, "*Verkeerde Werelden: Exempla Contraria in de Nederlandse Beeldende Kunst*," Ph.D. dissertation Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam 2004, 184–92.

⁵⁰ Jacob Cats, *Houwelyck: Dat is de Gantsche Gelegentheit des Echten Staets* (Den Haag: Adriaen van de Venne, 1628), 837; Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 35, no. 228.

⁵¹ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, book 4, ch. 10; Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 37–38, 198. Mexia describes the stages with different age boundaries: from 57 to 68 year and from 68 to 88 jaar, Mexia, *De Verscheijden Lessen*, book 1, ch. 41 [40], 174–76. See also the contribution to this volume by Harry Peters.

⁵² Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 44 and 46, no. 1371–72; Ilja Veldman, "Seasons, Planets and Temperaments in the Work of Maarten van Heemskerck: Cosmo-astrological Allegory in Sixteenth-Century Netherlandish Prints," *Simiolus* 11 (1980): 149–76; here 174–75; Veldman, "De Macht van de Planeten," 37–46; *Bilder vom alten Menschen*, no. 11–12; *Sterren in Beelden: Astrologie in de Eeuw van*

In descriptions and depictions of the ages of man that consist of ten times ten years one would expect that old age would be split into two clear polar parts. This is, however, not the case. The medieval rhymes on which this tradition is based typify almost all stages of life as being negative and in the depictions of the ten ages of man usually only one of the many stages of old age is rated as being positive, usually as being pious. In the Dutch, German, and Swiss representations of the ten ages of man piety is indicated by a rosary, a book (Bible or prayer book), a praying posture, or a deed of charity, like giving alms.⁵³ The other stages of old age are characterized by miserliness, depression, longing for death, and by derision and contempt as we saw in a series of ten discussed earlier from around 1600.

In addition to the series just mentioned, by Collaert after De Vos, in which the ages of man are compared to the seven planets, there is only one other Netherlandish ages-of-man series in which the first positive stage of old age is clearly distinguished from the second negative stage. This is a very original series of prints by Johannes Wierix after Hans Vredeman de Vries published by Pieter Baltens in 1577 in Antwerp.⁵⁴ In this series the ages of man are compared to five architectural orders, a very unusual comparison. The youngest stage of life corresponds to the youngest order, the Composite, the oldest stage of life with the oldest known order, the Tuscan. On the last engraving death is compared to a ruin. On each print in the series figures are seen depicting a specific stage of life standing on and around a building in which the order of architecture is incorporated to which they are compared. On the print with the stage of life running from 48 to 64 years of age there is a depiction of a building with Doric columns (ill. 9). On the terrace there are depictions of older men who look like scholars. Some are having a discussion, surrounded by books, and others are occupied with measuring instruments. In the caption it states that they are keen to pass on their knowledge to the next generation. This stage of life is symbolized by wisdom, scholarship, experience of life, and the giving of advice, and is

Mercator, Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Ann Brokken (Sint-Niklaas: Mercator, 1994), no. 8.1–8.8.

⁵³ Examples of the giving of alms: Gerard van Groeningen, *Sixty-Year-Old Man: The New Hollstein: Gerard van Groeningen*, vol. 1, no. 6; Anonymous after Maarten de Vos, *Eighty-Year-Old Man: Hollstein, Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 44 and 46, no. 1475.

⁵⁴ Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 67, nos. 1987–93; Peter Karstkarel, "Het Allegorisch Theater: Enkele Opmerkingen bij de Herdruk van het Theatrum Vitae Humanae van Hans Vredeman de Vries," *Akt 2* (1978): 18–36. Coloured edition of this series in: *Hans Vredeman de Vries und die Renaissance im Norden*, Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Heiner Borggrete et al. (Munich: Hirmer, 2002), no. 22; *De Wereld is een Tuin: Hans Vredeman de Vries en de Tuinkunst van de Renaissance*, Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Peter Fuhling (Antwerpen: Rubenshuis; Gent and Amsterdam: Ludion, 2002), 41–43, 53 and no. 43–44. Another series of prints with the six ages of man is made by Crispijn de Passe in 1599: Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 15, no. 492–98.

comparable to the first stage of old age that Ptolemy distinguishes and which is compared to Jupiter.

On the print with the following age of man, that lasts from 64 to 80 years of age, there is a depiction of a terrace of a building with Tuscan columns (ill. 10). The building is decrepit (broken tiles and windows), and other elements also indicate decay, like the bare tree, the ruin, and the ships that are being wrecked in the distance. On the terrace itself a gathering of old men are sitting around a table drinking and playing games. One of them is enjoying the company of a young woman who is sitting on his lap. This couple represents the popular theme of unequal love. The old man is being cautioned by a figure who is pointing to heaven and to the burial ground. Instead of paying attention to earthly matters, he should concern himself with the great beyond. To emphasize the foolishness of the old man Vredeman de Vries has given him a fool's cap. He is typified here as *senex stultus*, foolish old man.

Praise and Blame

The dichotomy sketched above, dividing positively and negatively loaded old-age themes can be placed within a far wider context than that of the ages-of-man traditions. Many of the stereotypical polar views of old age are reflections of the ways in which old age since antiquity has been couched in terms of praise and blame. On the one hand there was the 'laudatio senectutis', the eulogy in its praise, and on the other hand the 'vituperatio senectutis', criticizing it.⁵⁵ Broadly speaking, the stage of life referred to as old age –irrespective of the precise age—was either praised or defended, or alternately criticized, bemoaned and derided.⁵⁶ Influential examples of the 'laudatio' were written by Cicero (*Cato de senectute*) and Seneca (*Epistulae Morales*), whereas Aristotle (*Retorica*), Horace (*Ars poetica*), Juvenal (*Satires*) and Maximian (*Elegies*) are major criticasters.⁵⁷ The great influence of these

⁵⁵ 'Vituperatio senectutis' is used by Cicero in *Cato de Senectute*: Cicero, *Over Ouderdom*, ch. 12, par. 39. See also Parkin, *Old Age*, ch. 3, *passim*. The praise and blame duality is also discernible in the treatment of youth, see Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 10–38; Paul Griffiths, *Youth and Authority: Formative Experiences in England 1560–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), ch. 1.

⁵⁶ There is no consensus about when old age actually begins. The various theories range from the fortieth to the sixtieth year. For demographic information about old age in the early modern period, see Steven R. Smith, "Growing Old in an Age of Transition," *Old Age in Preindustrial Society*, ed. Peter Stearns (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982), 191–208; here 193–94; Hilde van Wijngaarden, *Zorg voor de Kost. Armenzorg: Arbeid en Onderlinge Hulp in Zwolle 1650–1700* (Amsterdam: Prometheus/Bakker, 2000), 92–95; Thane, *Old Age in English History*, 3, 21; Ingrid van der Vlis, *Leven in Armoede: Delftse Bedeelden in de Zeventiende Eeuw* (Amsterdam: Prometheus/Bakker, 2001), 81–82.

⁵⁷ Cicero, *Over Ouderdom*; Seneca, *Brieven aan Lucilius*, nos. 12, 26, 30, 36, 58, 77, 121; Aristotle, *Retorica*,

classical authors reverberates in works like Erasmus' *Lof der zotheid/Praise of Folly* (1511), Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593, 1644), and Jacob Cats's *Houwelyck* (1625), *Ouderdom* (1655), but also in the captions describing prints, in which literal citations from their works have been included.⁵⁸

In eulogies on old age the power of longevity is mainly stated in terms of spiritual growth during the last stage of life. The physical debilities that go with it are not disguised, but instead are mentioned as being the cause or even a prerequisite for the flourishing growth of a person's mental capacities. As the body has literally less freedom of movement, the mind has at last more room to develop itself. This development takes place mainly in the area of wisdom gained through having life experiences. In the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century representations highlighting wisdom and experience, old men and old women are often advisors or admonishers of the immature and fickle youths who have not yet learnt moderation.⁵⁹

One of the places where this theme is brought more to the forefront is in the illustrations by Adriaen van de Venne in the emblem books of Jacob Cats and Johan de Brune in which old people supply young people with advice.⁶⁰ The old advisors aim to propagate virtuousness and to guard the young from evils, like debauchery, choosing the wrong marriage partner or the wrong sort of friends. They often point out that the young should practice moderation, and young women are advised not to wait too long before entering into marriage.⁶¹ Van de Venne often uses the standard composition of an old woman giving a young woman advice on life and marriage as in the emblem 'Het Houw'licks bed zy onbesmet' (The marriage bed be unbesmirched) from the *Emblemata* (1624) by Johan de Brune (ill. 11).⁶² The motto of the emblem derives from *Paul's letter to the Hebrews* 13:4: 'Marriage is honorable in all and the bed undefiled: but

book 2, ch. 13; Horatius, *Verzamelde gedichten, Ars poetica*, vs. 169–74; Juvenalis, *De Satiren*, transl. Marietje d'Hane-Scheltema (Baarn: Ambo, 1984), no. 10, vs. 188–288; Maximianus, *Elegieën*, transl. Just Schadd and Allard Schröder (Amsterdam: Straat, 1987). For a survey of the long traditions of the polar visions on old age in Antiquity, see Parkin, *Old Age*, ch. 3.

⁵⁸ Desiderius Erasmus, *Lof der Zotheid of De Dwaasheid gekroond*, transl. Harmen Jan van Dam (Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Genneep, 2001), ch. 13, p. 24; Ripa, *Iconologia*; Jacob Cats, *Houwelyck: Dat is de Gansche Gelegentheydt des Echten Staets* (Middelburg: Jan Pietersz. Van de Venne, 1625), vol. *Weduwe*; Jacob Cats, *Ouderdom, Buyten-leven, en Hof-gedachten, op Sorgh-Vliet* (Amsterdam: Jan Jacobsz. Schipper, 1656).

⁵⁹ Janssen, *Grijsaards in Zwart-wit*, ch. 4.

⁶⁰ For instance in Jacob Cats, *Spiegel van den Ouden ende Nieuwen Tijd* (Den Haag: Is. Burchoom, 1632), vol. 1, no. 2, 3, 5, 30, 31, 38, 44, 51, 52; vol. 2, no. 9; vol. 3, no. 40.

⁶¹ Not to wait too long to get married/to be loved is a topos from Ovid's *Ars Amatoria: Ovidius, Minnekunst (Ars amatoria)*, transl. Micha Kat (Baarn: Ambo, 1993), book 3, vs. 1–100.

⁶² Johan de Brune, *Emblemata of Zinne-werck* (Amsterdam: Jan Evertsen Kloppenburch, 1624) no. 2; Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 35, no. 24.

whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.' This is developed in the texts accompanying the emblem, the message of the emblem being that honorable marriage is characterized by an unblemished bed, that is to say, a bed in which there is no room for lust. Nowhere is the old woman actually mentioned as the one who utters the marriage advice. Apparently an old woman was so recognizable as a marriage consultant that this was more than enough to allot this role to her in the *pictura*. Old mothers or maidservants like these are part of a long tradition and were already described as such in works like the *Heroides* by Ovid.⁶³

The moral opposite of such wise advisors are to be found in the prototype of the matchmakers or procuresses. These are old women who are experienced in the field of love, but they use it for morally reprehensible purposes, namely for matchmaking, often for money.⁶⁴ It is striking that matchmakers and procuresses are almost always depicted as old women, whereas in real life bawds were by no means all elderly.⁶⁵ Here old age has no associations with respected wisdom and experience of life, but with reprehensible behavior instead. This is in line with the widely held principle that moral decline was expressed by an ugly, grotesque, and deformed physiognomy and that being ugly in old age can point to culpability.⁶⁶

⁶³ Ovidius, *Legendarische Vrouwen (Heroides) van Ovidius*, transl. W. Peters (Baarn: Ambo, 1994), book 11, vs. 31–34. Compare also the story of Vertumnus and Pomona from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Ovidius, *Metamorphosen*, transl. Marietje d'Hane-Scheltema (Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak 7 Van Gennip, 1998), book 14, vs. 622–771. The story was often depicted in Netherlandish prints and paintings, see Eric Jan Sluijter, *De 'Heydendsche Fabulen' in de Schilderkunst van de Gouden Eeuw: Schilderijen met Verhalende Onderwerpen uit de Klassieke Mythologie in de Noordelijke Nederlanden circa 1590–1670* (Leiden: Primavera Pers, 2000), 33–36, 44, 55–56, 69–75, 143–54.

⁶⁴ See also Connie Scarborough's contribution about *Celestina* and Karen Pratt's and Gretchen Mieszkowski's respective studies of the figure of old women in medieval literature here in this volume.

⁶⁵ Lotte van de Pol, *Het AmsterdamsHoerdom: Prostitutie in de Zeventiende en Achttiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 1996), 133. The iconography of the wise advisors and bad procuresses is very similar to that of the old maids who are represented in many paintings and prints of the biblical and mythological Esther, Bathseba, Delilah, Judith or Danae. These young ladies are often assisted by an old maid, even though not all the biblical and mythological texts mention a maid or describe them as old. Apparently the stereotype of the old assistant was so persistent that artists chose this iconographical type. Their moral status is more ambiguous than that of the wise advisors and bad procuresses. See for examples: Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 4, 55–56, no. 3–4; vol. 11, p. 227, no. 198; vol. 15, p. 114, no. 10; *Bilder vom alten Menschen*, no. 64; Marcel Georges Roethlisberger and Marten Jan Bok, *Abraham Bloemaert and his Sons: Paintings and Prints* (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1993), no. 106; Eric Jan Sluijter, "Rembrandt's Bathsheba and the Conventions of a Seductive Theme," *Rembrandt's Bathsheba Reading King David's Letter*, ed. Ann Jensen Adams (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 48–100; here 51–59.

⁶⁶ Pomponius Gauricus, *De Sculptura* (1504), transl. André Chastel and Robert Klein (Genève, 1969), *De Physiognomonia*, 147 (wrinkles: absence of faith, untrustworthy), 161 (pale complexion: laziness, inertia, intemperance, sleep, lack of self-control); Ripa, *Iconologia*, 65, 96–97, 168–71; Shahar, *Growing Old*, 44, 47–51; Susanne Blöcker, *Studien zur Ikonographie der sieben Todsünden in der niederländischen und deutschen Malerei und Graphik von 1450–1560* (Münster: Lit, 1993), *passim*. For *Della Pittura* (1435)

The representations of the personifications of cardinal sins as farmers and witches are expressions of the same principle.⁶⁷

In scenes showing dignified old advisors the young and the old are often contrasted with one another (inexperienced as opposed to experienced). However, on a few occasions the old and the young are deemed to be complementary. Young people's lack of experience is set against what old people have to do without: energy and vigor. Within the topos of 'advice and deeds' the caution of the old and the decisiveness of the young are considered to be two separately valued characteristics. The old can supply advice which the energetic young can use. This topos is used as the theme for the month of May (*Maggio, Majus*) in Ripa's *Iconologia*. According to Ripa the Romans thought that the old with their advice, and the young with their weapons should serve the interests of the Republic.⁶⁸ In the lemma on *Consiglio, Raedslagh* (deliberation) he furthermore states that, even before the Romans the wise old Nestor understood the difference between old and young and linked them up to one another. He gave advice to young soldiers who in turn could put it into practice by 'using force' and 'weapons', something that Nestor could no longer do as he was 300 years old.⁶⁹

Not only the advisors fall under the theme of wisdom and prudence but also older men like judges (ill. 7), as can be seen in the series with planets and stages of man, and as scholars, like in the series by Wierix after Vredeman de Vries (ill. 9). The iconographic attributes of scholarship are a desk, books, writing materials, globes, and measuring instruments. Even items of clothing single them out like a

by Alberti, see Döring, "Bilder vom alten Menschen," 3. For other painter treatises about this subject, see Jan Muylle, "Tronies toegeschreven aan Pieter Bruegel," *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 17 (2001), 174–204 and *De Zeventiende Eeuw* 18 (2002), 115–48. In the comical genre 'deformitas' and 'turpitude' (deformity and ugliness) are also used to display reprehensible characters, but the intention is not to admonish, but to laugh, see Blöcker, *Studien zur Ikonographie*, 228–29; Mark van Vaec, *Adriaen van de Vennes Tafereel van de Belacchende Werelt (Den Haag 1635)* (Gent: Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde, 1994), vol. 3, 682–93; J. Verberckmoes, *Schertsen, Schimpen en Schateren: Geschiedenis van het Lachen in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, Zestiende en Zeventiende eeuw* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1998), 39–52; Muylle, "Tronies", 116–17; Hazelzet, "Verkeerde Werelden," 165.

⁶⁷ *Over Wilden en Narren*; Muylle, "Tronies," 181–82, 192–93; Paul Vandenbroeck, *Jheronimus Bosch: De Verlossing van de Wereld* (Gent and Amsterdam: Ludion, 2002), 173–279; Claudia Swan, *Art, Science, and Witchcraft in Early Modern Holland: Jacques de Gheyn II (1565–1629)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 159.

⁶⁸ Ripa, *Iconologia*, 319. That Ripa was right is confirmed by Parkin, *Old Age*, 242–43. Compare also Guillaume de la Perrière, *Theatre des Bons Engins* (Paris: Denys Janot, 1539), no. 12 and Florentius Schoonhovius, *Emblemata partim Moralia, partim etiam Civilian* (Gouda: Adream Burier, 1618), no. 7; Arthur Henkel and Albrecht Schöne, *Emblemata: Handbuch zur Sinnbildkunst des XVI. Und XVII. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1976), 961 and 1341. See also Cats, *Spiegel*, vol. 3, 30.

⁶⁹ Ripa, *Iconologia*, 426. Compare the emblem *Scyphus Nestoris* (Nestor's cup) in Alciatus, *Emblemata: Emblemata Lyons 1550: Andrea Alciato*, transl. Betty I. Knott (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1996), 110; *Andrea Alciatus (The Latin Emblems en Emblems in Translation)*, ed. Peter M. Daly and Virginia W. Callahan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), no. 102.

tabard and a beret.⁷⁰ Learned activities include conversing with others, as is the case with Wierix, but also writing, reading, or being lost in thought. In addition to frequently being depicted at an advanced age with a beard, a melancholy air is yet another element that belongs to the iconography of scholars. As already stated, varying, conflicting consequences were attributed to melancholy, and scholarly behavior is an example of a positive effect. The old scholar was particularly popular among the artists in Rembrandt's circle, and the Utrecht Caravaggist painters depicted the theme of the old scholar too. It is striking that the iconography of profane and ecclesiastical scholars is very similar.⁷¹ An example of this is a print by Rembrandt of Hieronymus in his study—lost in thought—from 1642 (ill. 12).⁷² He can only be recognized as the famous Church Father after close inspection. The traditional attributes of the skull, cardinal's hat, and lion do not play a prominent role in the picture. Only the crucifix near the window is noticeable, but this object is not the exclusive preserve of Hieronymus. Rembrandt had watered down the iconography to such an extent that in art-historical literature the identity of this old man was a much discussed topic.⁷³

In the eulogies on old age another reason is given for commending this stage of life, namely that a weak body is at last set free from any frustrating feelings of lust. The absence of the need for pleasurable experiences was considered by Cicero and Seneca as a joy in itself, and on this topic they cite Plato.⁷⁴ He recounted in the *Politeia* the reaction of old Cephalus, when Socrates asked him about love at his advanced stage of life. The old man answered that he was happy to be delivered

⁷⁰ For the tabard (gown), see Marieke de Winkel, "'Eene der deftigsten dragten': The Iconography of the *Tabbaard* and the Sense of Tradition in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Portraiture," *Beeld en Zelfbeeld in de Nederlandse Kunst, 1550–1750: Image and Self-Image in Netherlandish art, 1550–1750*. Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek, 46 (Zwolle: Waanders, 1995), 144–67.

⁷¹ The iconography of the scholar is developed from author portraits from Antiquity, images of church fathers, and especially of Saint Jerome in his study. For this pictorial tradition, see Eugene F. Rice, *Saint Jerome in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Christiane Wiebel, *Askese und Endlichkeitsdemut in der italienischen Renaissance* (Weinheim: VCH, Acta Humaniora, 1988); Catherine B. Scallen, "Rembrandt and Saint Jerome," Ph.D. dissertation Princeton 1990; Christiane Wiebel, "Die Weisheit des Greises zwischen religiöser Kontemplation und philosophischer Erkenntnis: Das Beispiel des heiligen Hieronymus," *Bilder vom alten Menschen*, 69–77; *Leselust: Niederländische Malerei von Rembrandt bis Vermeer*, Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Anne Jensen Adams, Sabine Schulze, Philipp Ackermann (Frankfurt a. M.: Schirn Kunsthalle, 1993); *Wisdom, Knowledge and Magic: The Image of the Scholar in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art*, Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Volker Manuth (Kingston: Queen's University, 1996), 13–14.

⁷² Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 18 and 19, no. B.105; Scallen, "Rembrandt and Saint Jerome," ch. 2; *Wisdom, Knowledge and Magic*, no. 25.

⁷³ For a survey, see Scallen, "Rembrandt and Saint Jerome," 110–16.

⁷⁴ Cicero, *Over Ouderdom*, ch. 12–14; Seneca, *Brieven aan Lucilius*, no. 12, par. 5.

at last from that obsessed lord and master.⁷⁵ The mental space and the rest this gave could be used by an older person to prepare sing. themselves mentally for death, and in Christian traditions the most usual method was by showing piety. Old people in these positively loaded topoi are often used as admirable examplars in contrast to the fickle, wasteful, and spoilt young.⁷⁶

Examples in which an idealized picture of piety and modesty is reflected are the representations already mentioned showing old women saying their prayers, using a rosary to count them, a Bible or a prayer book, as well as those with old couples praying, old men reciting the rosary or old men who perform charitable deeds. Similar scenes do not only appear in representations of stages-of-life, but in other genres as well.⁷⁷ One example is the pious old woman on an engraving by Daniël van den Brenden after Adriaen van de Venne (ill. 13) from around 1625–1635.⁷⁸ She is sitting at a table, wearing a pince-nez, and leafing through a book, probably a Bible or a prayer book. The caption gives a clue to the reason for her piety: 'Before the threads of miserable old age can be pulled asunder / the woman turns her attention to the holy matters of life and God.'⁷⁹ The prospect of death ensures that the old woman concerns herself with her spiritual welfare. She presents the ideal image of old age, liberated at last from the urge to pursue worldly and material pleasures, and able to exchange them for spiritual maturity, moderation, and attention to God and the hereafter.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Plato, *Republic*, transl. Louise Ropes Loomis and Benjamin Jowett (Roslyn: Black, 1969), book 1, p. 223–24. For the long tradition of this topos, see Parkin, *Old Age*, 60–61, 63 and 200.

⁷⁶ See for instance two prints by Werner van den Valckert, Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 32, no. 9–10; *Bilder vom alten menschen*, no. 101–02; *Spiegel van Alledag: Nederlandse Genreprenten 1550–1700*, Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Eddy de Jongh and Ger Luijten (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1997), 291–92.

⁷⁷ Janssen, *Grijsaards in Zwart-wit*, ch. 3.

⁷⁸ Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 3, nr. 8. Another example is a print by Cornelis Bloemaert after a painting by Abraham Bloemaert: Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 2, nr. 300a; Joshua Bruyn, "Jung und Alt: Ikonographische Bemerkungen zur Tronie," *Hendrick ter Brugghen und die Nachfolger Caravaggios in Holland*, ed. Rüdiger Klessmann (Braunschweig: Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, 1988), 66–76; here 71–72; Roethlisberger and Bok, *Abraham Bloemaert*, no. 485 (see no. 486 for another early painting by Bloemaert of a pious old woman).

⁷⁹ 'Sancta prius mulier canae quam fila senectae/ Scindantur, vitae consulit, atque deum'. Translation Arnoud Visser.

⁸⁰ These kinds of images also reflect the ideal of the good widow, but it is a misunderstanding that this is the only possible interpretation. Apart from married old women also old spinsters should not be forgotten. For the dual image of the widow, see Ariadne Schmidt, "Van de Lusten geproefd, Wellust in het Weduwebeeld in de Vroegmoderne Periode: Twee Eeuwenoude Weduwebeelden," *Jaarboek voor vrouwengeschiedenis* 20 (2000): 65–83. For the old spinster, see Amy M. Froide, "Old Maids: The Lifecycle of Single Women in Early Modern England," *Women and Ageing in British Society since 1500*, ed. Lynn A. Botelho and Pat Thane (Harlow: Longman, 2001), 89–110. For old spinsters and religion, see Judith Pollmann, "Women and Religion in the Dutch Golden Age," *Dutch Crossing* 24 (2000): 163–82.

Old age can also be characterized as a period of rest in which one can enjoy everything achieved in the past.⁸¹ This idea is expressed by depicting old figures using iconographic elements of the pictorial tradition for depicting winter, the season in which people can live off the things they have stored in the past year. An example of this is the *pictura* from an emblem book by Hadrianus Junius. In it once again old and young have been placed next to one another as contrasts (ill. 14).⁸² Whilst a young man is digging the earth with a spade the old man is sitting inside at a set table. In the text it is made clear that you must work and exploit the vigor of youth so that you can enjoy the fruits of your labor in old age. Entirely in keeping with the rules of *tempestivitas*, a clear division of tasks is propagated for each of the ages of man.⁸³ Prints with satisfied elderly people can be looked upon as incentives for the younger generation to work hard, so that they will be able to look forward to a carefree old age.⁸⁴

An excellent representation of a eulogy to old age in a nutshell is given by the emblem *Varia senectae bona*, 'The good sides to old age are manifold', from the *Quinti horati flacci emblemata* (1607) by Otto van Veen, Rubens's instructor.⁸⁵ On the *pictura* of this emblem *Prudence*, *Moderation* and *Fame* are presented in an allegorical representation of the good sides of old age (ill. 15). In this representation the winged and bearded Old Father Time ensures that the three personifications of these notions are given a clear field to approach *Old Age*, the old bearded man sitting down. The young woman with the looking-glass represents *Prudence*, the one with the bridle *Temperance*, and the Cupid with the laurel wreath *Fame*. They take the place of the sins of youth which Old Father Time chases away with his reaping hook: *Somnus* (Sleep; the figure with a coronal of opium-seed balls on his

⁸¹ Janssen, *Grijsaards in Zwart-wit*, ch. 2, par. 2.2.

⁸² Hadrianus Junius, *Emblemata* (Antwerp: Christoffel Plantijn, 1565), no. 35; Henkel and Schöne, *Emblemata*, 962.

⁸³ Other examples of prints with the theme of rest in old age: Gerard van Groeningen, *Seventy-Year-Old Man*, 1572; *The New Hollstein: Gerard van Groeningen*, vol. 1, no. 7; Jan Saenredam naar Hendrick Goltzius, *Winter*, c. 1594–1595; Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 23, no. 96; Ilja Veldman, "Goltzius' Zintuigen, Seizoenen, Elementen, Planeten en Vier Tijden van de Dag: Van Allegorie naar Genre-voorstelling," *Goltzius-studies: Hendrick Goltzius (1558–1617)*, ed. Reindert Falkenburg, Jan Piet Filedt Kok, Huigen Leeftang, *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 42–43 (Zwolle: Waanders, 1993), 307–36; here 315–17; *'Der Welt Lauf'*, no. 32.4; Christiane Lauterbach, "Masked Allegory: The Cycle of the Four Seasons by Hendrick Goltzius, ca. 1594–95," *Simiolus* 4 (2004–2005): 310–21; here 311–12, 317–19.

⁸⁴ For this subject, see also Armstrong, *The Moralizing Prints*, 61 and 130; Ilja Veldman, "Images of Diligence and Labour: The Secularization of the Work Ethic", *Images for the Eye and Soul: Function and Meaning in Netherlandish Prints (1450–1650)*, ed. Ilja Veldman (Leiden: Primavera Pers, 2006), 171–93. See also proverbs in Brune, *Nieuwe Wijn*, 251, 253–55.

⁸⁵ Otto van Veen, *Quinti Horati Flacci Emblemata* (Antwerpen: Hieronymus Verdussen, 1607), 162–63; Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 32, no. 154; *Bilder vom alten Menschen*, no. 42. Translation motto by Arnoud Visser.

head), *Gustus* (*Taste*; the man biting into a piece of fruit), *Cupido* (*Love*), and *Ludus* (*Gaming*; the figure with the tambourine). In the texts that accompany the emblem Van Veen makes use of citations from Horace, Cicero, Seneca, and Ovid, which clarify the *pictura*.⁸⁶ Seneca's citation phrases shortly and succinctly the classical rationale represented in the *pictura*: 'The eye of common sense only begins to see keenly, / when the eye in the body begins to weaken.'⁸⁷ The development of this idea can be read later in Cats too in his book *Ouderdom, buyten-leven, en hof-gedachten, op Sorgh-Vliet* (1656) which he wrote at a highly advanced age: 'Wanneer het lijf verswackt, het oogh sijn glans verliest, / Dan is het dat de geest de beste wegen kiest'⁸⁸ (When the body weakens, the eye loses its luster, / It is then that the mind makes the best choices).

On the opposite side of the spectrum the bad aspects of old age are accentuated. In the influential criticism provided by Aristotle these are mainly changing characteristic traits, like complaining, cowardliness, anxiety, talkativeness (particularly about everything that used to be better), and miserliness.⁸⁹ In the pessimistic description of old age provided by Juvenal and Maximian it is the physical and mental decline which is given special emphasis.⁹⁰ Bad eyes, a croaky voice, wrinkles, toothlessness, stiff joints, a bent back, grey hair, baldness, impotence, and senility—all pass in review. Similar distinguishing features could also be considered as *topoi* in antiquity, and just like the texts written by Cicero and Seneca, there was a large reading public for the texts of Aristotle, Juvenal, and Maximian during the Middle Ages and the early-modern period.⁹¹ For instance, about a hundred lines from Maximian's text have been borrowed in one of the first medical handbooks on old age, the *Gerontocomia* by Gabriele Zerbi, and a few lines are to be found again in captions of prints. With their descriptions the authors want to show that old age brings nothing but misery. Old people lack the vitality they once had, they have to do without all pleasures—here old age is contrasted with youth in a negative way—and Maximian adds to this the extreme conclusion that the only outcome is death.⁹² The remark that death is the only way out, is a *topos* that Seneca mentions too. Due to the lack of good medical provision death

⁸⁶ For the translations of the text of the emblem, see *Bilder vom alten Menschen*, no. 42.

⁸⁷ 'Tum demum sanae mentis oculus acute cernere incipit, ubi corporis oculus incipit hebescere.' Translation Arnoud Visser. It is probably a paraphrase of Seneca, *Brieven aan Lucilius*, no. 26, par. 1–3.

⁸⁸ Cats, *Ouderdom*, 13.

⁸⁹ Aristotle, *Rhetorica*, book 2, ch. 13; Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 8–11; Parkin, *Old Age*, 76–78.

⁹⁰ Juvenalis, *De Satiren*; Maximianus, *Elegieën*.

⁹¹ Juvenalis, *De Satiren* 206–07. For the influence of Juvenal's Satires, see Levi Robert Lind, *Gabriele Zerbi, Gerontocomia: On the Care of the Aged and Maximianus, Elegies on Old Age and Love* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1988), 309–18. For the influence of Maximian's text, see Parkin, *Old Age*, 87. For the translations and influence of Aristotle, see Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 8–11. For the long tradition of the negative view of old age in Antiquity, see Parkin, *Old Age*, 87–89.

⁹² Maximianus, *Elegieën*, no. 1, vs. 1–10, 110–18.

was in fact the only release from old people's ailments.⁹³ The earlier mentioned print by Sadeler after De Vos (ill. 2) with the pathetic old man sitting in front of a painting depicting the Last Judgment is a reflection of this topos.

A summary of the negatively loaded topoi on old age is to be found in the three entries on *Vecchiezza* (*Old Age*) contained in Ripa's *Iconologia* (1644), in which a few are connected to the pictorial imagery.⁹⁴ According to Ripa, old age lasts from fifty to sixty years of age and is personified by an old, scrawny woman with an ashen, pallid complexion and lots of wrinkles. The fact that Ripa chose a woman for the personification is related to the female gender of the word 'vecchiezza', in the same way as all the lemmas of words that only have a female form in Italian.⁹⁵ In addition to the outward characteristics of the old woman, Ripa also mentions certain attributes that reflect decline and mortality, like an hourglass in which the sand has almost run through, two pairs of glasses, a stick, wilted roses (a frequently used motif—in text and image—representing diminished feminine beauty), and a bare branch. As animal attributes Ripa mentions a snail or a tortoise. Although these motifs are all references to mortality and decline, with the reference to the proverb 'with one foot in the grave' ('houdende d'eene voet hoogh en opgeheven boven een kuyt' — keeping one foot high and raised above a hole) it becomes quite clear that the end is nigh.

The expression 'with one foot in the grave' appears in many dictionaries of proverbs and in prints the proverb is depicted as a figure dangling his/her foot in or over an open grave.⁹⁶ One example of this is the old fool in *Das Narrenschiff* and *Der sotten schip*. In the woodcut accompanying the fifth chapter we see a fool leaning on two sticks with his right foot in a burial pit (ill. 16).⁹⁷ The filleting knife

⁹³ For the history of geriatrics, gerontology and geropsychology, see Joseph T. Freeman, *Aging: Its History and Literature* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1979); James E. Birren and Hans Schroots, "The History of Geropsychology," *Handbook of the Psychology of Aging*, ed. James E. Birren en K. Warner Schaie (San Diego: Academic Press, 2001), 3–28; Daniel Schäfer, *Alter und Krankheit in der Frühen Neuzeit: Der ärztliche Blick auf die letzte Lebensphase* (Frankfurt and New York: Campus Verlag, 2004). One of the first geriatric handbooks was the *Gerontocomia* (1489) by Gabriele Zerbi (1455–1505). A hundred lines from Maximian's *Elegies* are quoted by Zerbi, see Lind, *Gabriel Zerbi*, 9, 53–59 and a few lines were quoted in the print series by Van Groeningen.

⁹⁴ Ripa, *Iconologia*, 394–95.

⁹⁵ *Cesare Ripa, Iconologia*, VII.

⁹⁶ De Brune, *Nieuwe Wijn*, 251, 298; Andriessoon, *Duytse Adagia*, no. 19.1 and 78.5.1; Jacob van Royen, 's *Menschen Leven van de Wieg tot het Graf* (Amsterdam: Jacob van Royen, 1695), 73, no. 14; Wayne Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1993), 162. For proverb prints with this proverb, see *The New Hollstein Dutch and Flemish etchings, engravings and Woodcuts, 1450–1700: The Van Doetecum Family*, ed. Henk Nalis (Rotterdam: Sound & Vision Interactive, 1998), vol. 3, nr. 790, plate a and Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 38 and 39, no. 311. For the history of this proverb, see Parkin, *Old Age*, 75.

⁹⁷ Brant, *Das Narrenschiff*, ch. 5; Brant, *Der Sotten Schip*, ch. 5; Brant, *Narrensch(h)liff*, ch. 5. For a completely different woodcut by Tobias Stimmer, compare also Sebastian Brant, *Welt Spiegel oder*

sticking out of his behind also indicates that he is almost dead.⁹⁸ The fool represents the foolish elderly, the *senex stultus*, who still has the same 'Quade ghewoonte' (Bad habits) as in his youth and even goes as far as advocating them. In his text accompanying the old fool Brant points out that people should learn from the mistakes they made in their youth: 'Elck leere van joncx dat hem mach baten, / Om te besitten dat eewich leven' (Anything learnt in youth that will benefit him / To enjoy everlasting life). By this Brant is referring to the topos that the—good and bad—habits learnt in your youth will have a decisive influence on the rest of your life and for this reason you must live a virtuous life in your youth. This topos occurs in both homilies and medical sources.⁹⁹

With the old fool Brant creates the image of the old person who is still young, or who would still like to be young and who is therefore implausible and ridiculous. Comparable to this is the satirical description of old people who try to disguise senile decay by employing ruses as seen in *Lof der Zotheid/Praise of Folly* (1511) by Erasmus. The folly that is ridiculed here is that of old men and women who pretend to be younger than they really are, and Madam Folly alleges that flirting, dyeing your hair, wearing a wig or false teeth are all examples of denial of your true age, as is losing oneself in lust, particularly with a younger partner.¹⁰⁰ Here it is not the senile decay of the elderly nor the lack of respect shown by the younger generation in their behavior toward the elderly that causes old age to be thrown in a negative light; rather, it is the objectionable behavior of the old people themselves, as in the print with the *senex stultus* by Wierix after Vredeman de Vries (ill. 10). In essence it boils down to the fact that you should not act as if you were young, when you are, in reality, old. You shouldn't disavow old age. This is expressed in the principle of *tempestivitas*, and this moral also lies at the root of many other representations of lecherous old characters.

Unequal love, described by Erasmus and depicted by Wierix after Vredeman de Vries, is one of the most common ways of dealing with this moral. The result is usually satirical and comical. Representations of unequal love appeared as early as the fifteenth century, in prints and paintings. In addition to the ethical view that

Narren Schiff (Basel, 1574), ch. 5 for a completely different woodcut by Tobias Stimmer.

⁹⁸ "das schyntmesser im ars", Brant, *Das Narrenschiff*, ch. 5.

⁹⁹ For Francis Bacon, see Gabriele Zerbi, Luigi Cornaro, Roger Bacon: Freeman, Aging; Birren and Schroots, "The History of Geropsychology"; Schäfer, *Alter und Krankheit*. See also Cicero, *Over Ouderdom*, par. 7, 29, 36, 62, 65; *Der Scaepherders Kalengier: Een Vlaams Volksboek, naar het Unieke Exemplaar van de Antwerpse Druk door Willem Vorsterman van 1513*, ed. Willy Louis Braekman (Bruges: Marc van de Welie, 1985), part. 1, 'Prologhe vanden Translatioer'; Zacharias Heyns, *Emblemata Moralia* (Rotterdam: Pieter van Waesberge, 1625), 20v–22r and 22–24r; Cats, *Ouderdom*, 159–60, 215–18; Brune, *Bankket-werk*, part 2, p. 307, no. 498.

¹⁰⁰ Erasmus, *Lof der Zotheid*, ch. 31, p. 48. For 'simple denials of one's age', see also Parkin, *Old Age*, 81–82.

it is disgraceful for old people to be ruled by desire, lust, and lechery, the medical men and moralists also pointed out that it could be damaging.¹⁰¹ There are a number of distinguishable variations on this theme, like the 'classical' representation in which the old person tries to seduce the young person with money, but this is never successful.¹⁰² The young person turns down the old man or woman in favor of a partner their own age, as illustrated in a print by Jan Saenredam after Hendrick Goltzius from 1600 (ill. 17).¹⁰³ In the variations in which money does not play a role the message is often of a more general nature. Not only unequal love, but the *senex amans* (old lover) in general is condemned and ridiculed.¹⁰⁴

Another way of denoting the folly of old age is by portraying an old person as a miser, for instance with a money-pouch, behind a desk loaded with money and other precious objects, or groping in a money-chest.¹⁰⁵ In such representations, too, the old person is denying his longevity and trying to cling on desperately to worldly goods that will soon be of no use whatsoever. Examples of this are to be found in steps of life, in series with the ten ages of man, and in series showing the six ages of man by De Passe.¹⁰⁶ The old miserly men and women are comparable

¹⁰¹ For this moral in Antiquity, see Falkner and De Luce, "A View from Antiquity," 19, 23; De Luce, "Continuity and Change," 364; Parkin, *Old Age*, 74, 198–201, 255. For the Middle Ages, see Burrow, *The Ages of Man*, 156–62, 179–88; Shahar, *Growing Old*, 77–81. For seventeenth-century proverbs and sayings about (unequal) love in old age, see Cats, *Spiegel*, vol. 1, *Liefdes Kort-sprake*, 52–53; De Brune, *Bankket-werk*, vol. 1, p. 52, no. 170; vol. 1, p. 135, no. 369; vol. 1, p. 149, no. 157; vol. 1, p. 352, no. 866; vol. 1, p. 355, no. 872; vol. 2, p. 169, no. 244; vol. 2, p. 213, no. 337. For the medical perspective, see Johan van Beverwyck, *Schat der Gesontheydt: Met Veersen versiert door de heer Jacob Cats, Ridder* (Utrecht: Harman Specht, 1651), 216–17.

¹⁰² W.A. Coupe, "Ungleiche Liebe: A Sixteenth-Century Topos," *The Modern Language Review* 62 (1967): 661–71; Alison G. Stewart, *Unequal Lovers: A Study of Unequal Couples in Northern Art* (New York: Abaris Books, 1977); Ellen Fleurbaay, "Alison G. Stewart: Unequal Lovers. A Study of Unequal Couples in Northern Art," *Simiolus* 12 (1981–1982): 162–67; Konrad Renger, "Alte Liebem gleich und ungleich: Zu einem satirischen Bildthema bei Jan Massys," *Netherlandish Mannerism: Papers given at a Symposium in Nationalmuseum Stockholm, September 21–22, 1984*, ed. Görel Cavalli-Björkman (Stockholm: Nationalmuseum, 1985), 35–46; *Over Wilden en Narren*, 262–66; *Bilder vom Alten Menschen*, 56–57, 81–82 and no. 73–76; Annemarie de Wildt, "Wijckt oudt cout vel, al sijt ghij rijcke": Oude Vrouwen en Mannen in Taferelen van Ongelijke Liefde," *Lange Levens, Stille Getuigen, Oudere Vrouwen in het Verleden*, ed. Monique Stavenuit, Karin Bijsterveld (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1995), 22–37; *Spiegel van Alledag*, no. 9.

¹⁰³ Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 11, no. 329–30 (ascribed to Jacob Matham); Pieter van Thiel, "Moeyaert and Bredero: A Curious Case of Dutch Theatre as Depicted in Art," *Simiolus* 6 (1972–1973): 29–49; here, 48; *Spiegel van Alledag*, 83. In early examples of the so called love triangles the young man or woman accepts the money, but passes it on to his/her young partner.

¹⁰⁴ Janssen, *Grijsaards in Zwart-wit*, ch. 6.

¹⁰⁵ Janssen, *Grijsaards in Zwart-wit*, ch. 5.

¹⁰⁶ Gerard van Groeningen, *Fifty-Year-Old Man: The New Hollstein: Gerard van Groeningen*, vol. 1, no. 5; Anonymous after Maarten de Vos, *Sixty-Year-Old Man*, Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 44 and 46, no. 1473. Crispijn de Passe, *Senectus*: Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 15, no. 497.

to the figures from the pictorial tradition of the cardinal sin *Avaritia*, which is a combination of miserliness and avarice. Various types can be distinguished in the pictorial tradition.¹⁰⁷ The allegorical ugly old woman with money-pouches and her appendage, the toad, are quite widespread in sixteenth-century representations.¹⁰⁸ In keeping with the general development from an allegorical toward a commonplace manner of representation, she is transformed in the seventeenth century into an ordinary looking woman, as in a print by Cornelis Bloemaert after a painting by Abraham Bloemaert from 1625 (ill. 18).¹⁰⁹ The old woman is examining her coins and jewels by candlelight and is holding a pince-nez in her hand. This type of old woman was also painted by other Utrecht Caravaggist painters, Gerard van Honthorst for one.¹¹⁰ Father and son De Passe also set the type in print during their stay in Utrecht.¹¹¹ Unlike the old women, the old man is often depicted in professional surroundings, in a sort of office, behind a desk with papers and money as in the paintings by Quentin Massys and Martin van Reymerwael.¹¹² Sometimes there is a wife sitting next to him. Such desk scenes can also be found on boxes that held sets of coin weights and a balance and in ages-of-man series consisting of ten representations.¹¹³

¹⁰⁷ For the pictorial tradition of avarice and greed, see *Tot Lering en Vermaak: Hollandse Genrevoorstellingen uit de Zeventiende eeuw*, Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Jan-Baptist Bedaux and Eddy de Jongh (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1976), no. 31; Larry Silver, "The Ill-Matched Pair by Quinten Massys," *Studies in the History of Art* 6 (1974): 105–23; here 81–91; K.P.F. Moxey, "The Criticism of Avarice in Sixteenth-Century Netherlandish Painting," *Netherlandish Mannerism*, 21–34; Basil Selig Yamey, *Art & Accounting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Blöcker, *Studien zur Ikonographie*, ch. D-V; Marloes Huiskamp and Cornelis de Graaf, *Gewogen of Bedrogen: Het wegen van Geld in de Nederlanden* (Leiden: Rijksmuseum Het Koninklijk Penningkabinet, 1994); Annette de Vries, *Ingelijst Werk: De Verbeelding van Arbeid en Beroep in de Vroegmoderne Nederlanden* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2004), 142, 149–53; *Spiegel van Alledag*, no. 36 and 59.

¹⁰⁸ Blöcker, *Studien zur Ikonographie*, 101–02, 104–05.

¹⁰⁹ Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 2, no. 286; Bruyn, "Jung und Alt," 73; Franits, "Zwischen Frömmigkeit und Geiz," 83. For different versions of the print, see Roethlisberger and Bok, *Abraham Bloemaert*, no. 395 and *Spiegel van Alledag*, no. 36. For the development from allegory to 'genre', see Ilja Veldman, "From Allegory to Genre," *Images for the Eye and Soul: Function and Meaning in Netherlandish Prints (1450–1650)*, ed. Ilja Veldman (Leiden: Primavera Pers, 2006), 193–222.

¹¹⁰ Jay Richard Judson and Rudolf Ekkart, *Gerrit van Honthorst, 1592–1656* (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1999), 228–29.

¹¹¹ Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 16, no. 282ad; *Spiegel van Alledag*, 194; Ilja Veldman, *Crispijn de Passe and his Progeny (1564–1670): A Century of Print Production* (Rotterdam: Sound & Vision Publishers, 2001), 225, 229.

¹¹² De Vries, *Ingelijst Werk*, ill. 97 and 98.

¹¹³ For the type of the avaricious man and couple, see Yamey, *Art & Accounting*, ch. 3; Blöcker, *Studien zur Ikonographie*, 99–100; Huiskamp and De Graaf, *Gewogen of Bedrogen*, 11–24; De Vries, *Ingelijst Werk*, 142. An example of an old man and old woman counting their money is a print by Fransiscus van der Steen after David Teniers: Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 28, no. 34; *Spiegel van Alledag*, no. 59. The series of ten by De Passe and Van Londerseel after De Bruyn: Crispijn de Passe, *Sixty-Year-Old Man*, Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 15, no. 483; Assuerus van Londerseel

The connection between old age and the cardinal sin *Avaritia* (Avarice) can be considered and explained from a number of different, connected perspectives. In the first place old misers express the link between physiognomy and moral recognition (ugly outward appearance = a bad nature), which is expressed particularly poignantly in the sixteenth-century allegorical representations of *Avaritia* using old ugly women. Furthermore the influence of the ambivalent melancholy temperament plays a noteworthy role. People with this temperament were expected to have a cold and dry body and were therefore attracted to money (also cold and dry). For this reason in the iconography of the four temperaments melancholy is also depicted as a man behind a table with money.¹¹⁴ Here we can clearly see how much the pictorial traditions of *Avaritia*, the melancholy, and the burden of old age converge and connect.

Apart from the explanation based on the *Avaritia* tradition and the analogical way of thinking, the association between miserliness and old age would have had a practical reason. In times when old-age pensions didn't exist there was great anxiety about being reduced to poverty in old age.¹¹⁵ People who weren't wealthy were therefore the first to be forced to work as long as possible and to save their money. When people were no longer able to work due to their advanced years it was essential that they managed their savings and property as best they could.¹¹⁶ Hanging on to what you have saved and being thrifty isn't such strange behavior under the circumstances.¹¹⁷

Exempla and exempla contraria

The behavior of the lecherous and miserly old characters is directly opposed to moderation, piety and wisdom as represented in the complete opposite topoi on old age. When these two sides of the coin are used in a moralizing way they can

after Nicolaes de Bruyn, *Sixty-Year-Old Man*: Hollstein, *Dutch and Flemish Etchings*, vol. 4, no. 205.

¹¹⁴ Ripa, *Iconologia*, 77; Lütke Notarp, *Von Heiterkeit*, 165, 189–90, 240.

¹¹⁵ Shahr, *Growing Old*, 9–10, 93; Botelho and Thane, "Introduction," 8–9; Parkin, *Old Age*, 224–25.

¹¹⁶ Recent studies on the care for the poor (elderly): Liesbeth Geudeke, "Bédelen of bedélen: Kerkelijke en Burgerlijke Armenzorg op Kleinschalig Niveau: Edam, Monnickendam en Purmerend (1572–1650)," *Mensen van de nieuwe Tijd: Een Liber Amicorum voor A. Th. Van Deursen*, ed. Marijke Bruggeman (Amsterdam: Bakker, 1996), 128, 131, 129; Joke Spaans, *Armenzorg in Friesland 1500–1800. Publieke Zorg en Particuliere Liefdadigheid in zes Friese Steden Leeuwarden, Bolsward, Franeker, Sneek, Dokkum en Harlingen* (Hilversum: Verloren; Leeuwarden: Fryske Akademy, 1997), 38, 375; Van Wijngaarden, *Zorg voor de Kost*, 56–59, 87–118, 210–21; Van der Vlis, *Leven in Armoede*, 160, 174, 216–25, 284–85, 338, 341.

¹¹⁷ For a justification of greed, see *Der Naturen Bloeme*, ed. Maurits Gysseling ('s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), fol. 9v, vs. 230–38 and *Der Scaepherders Kalengier, Prologhe vanden scaepherder*, month september (48–54 years).

be looked upon as old-age morality. Closely connected to the early-modern manner of denoting good and bad by means of virtues and vices, this old-age morality, like any morality, is captured in the construction of the world in reverse order or upside down.¹¹⁸ By showing reverse examples, *exempla contraria*, the correct moral qualities are made clear: the good is inherent in the bad, as it were. The old people who disguise their physical decline by wearing wigs, who think they are still young and go off looking for a young partner, or who obstinately hoard their money, are bearers of the same morals as the old people who, thanks to their physical decline, give wise advice or piously turn their attention to God. In other words, the second group, the *exempla*, presents an ideal picture, and shows how it is supposed to be done, whereas the first group, the *exempla contraria*, shows exactly the opposite. The message, however, remains the same. In such a moralizing context old age as a *vanitas* symbol can, on the one hand, refer to inner peace and spiritual growth (in the case of pious, wise old people), or, on the other hand, to moral deterioration (in the case of lecherous old people, misers, and bawds).

The prints which did not deal with condemnable behavior on the part of old people (but dealt with young people instead), or those which deal mainly with physical and mental ailments, the sorrow experienced in old age and a person's confrontation with their conscience can less easily be understood in terms of the established moralizing lines of *exempla* and *exempla contraria*. It is only when old people start to compensate for their shortcomings or when they deny their age—even though some have literally one foot in the grave—that they can be accused of reprehensible behavior inconsistent with the *tempestivitas* principle, which stipulates that each age of man is bound to its own season—or to typical age-related features.

Characteristic of the representation of many *exempla contraria* is that the opposite sides are presented in a form of satire, as can be seen in Brant (ill. 16), Erasmus or the prints of Wierix after Vredeman de Vries (ill. 10), and Saenredam after Goltzius (ill. 17). Particularly when old people engage in love, as in the scenes with a *senex amans* (old lover), they are condemnable and implausible, not to mention ridiculous and in some cases just plain comical. It is different for representations of miserliness and avarice. This evil behavior is more likely to be rendered in a more serious way, rather than using mockery. Moreover, the tone in which this pernicious behavior is set often corresponds to the type of print.

On the whole emblems are more serious and moralizing in character than individual prints and are less inclined to employ crude images and caricatures. The positive representations of piety and wisdom are more likely to be of a serious

¹¹⁸ Paul Vandenbroeck, *Jheronimus Bosch*; Korine Hazelzet, "Verkeerde Werelden".

nature—irrespective of the type of print. Here it is the theme that controls the tone and the type of print makes less of a difference. It is worth noting that the popularity of the representations of lust and love does not spring from the ubiquitous contempt of old people, but is connected with the appeal of representing an upside-down world in general and lust and deception in particular.

From the afore-mentioned discussion it has become clear that what at first sight would appear to be a contradictory view of old age, has many interfaces. Representations of stereotyped 'good' and 'bad' old people are shown consecutively, the one stage following on from the other stage; side by side, as in the topoi of praise and blame; and in opposition to one another, as in the case of *exempla* and *exempla contraria*. Hopefully, these conclusions will be an impulse to interpret the polar representations in other periods and media in the same way as here. But they can also be used as a starting point for the study of representations of other subjects that show a similar polarity. In so doing it is important to bear in mind the connection between positive and negative representations, instead of dealing with them one-sidedly or emphasizing the apparent contradictions.

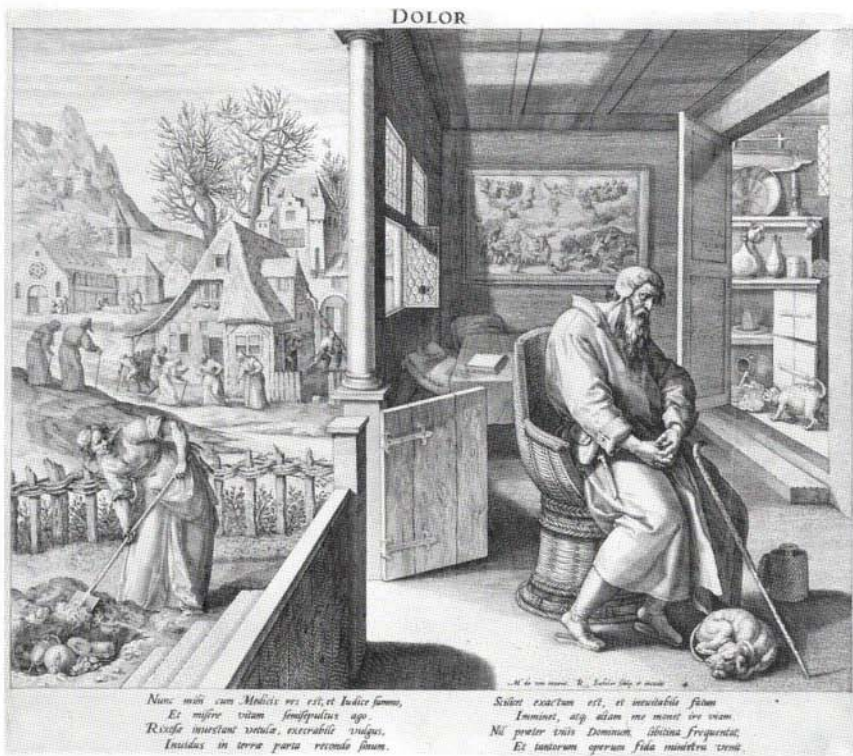


Figure 2: Raphael Sadeler I after Maarten de Vos, *Dolor* (Sorrow), 1591



Figure 3: Assuerus van Londerseel after Nicolaes de Bruyn, *Eighty-Year-Old-Man*, c. 1600



Figure 4: Assuerus van Londerseel after Nicolaes de Bruyn,
Ninety-Year-Old-Man, c. 1600

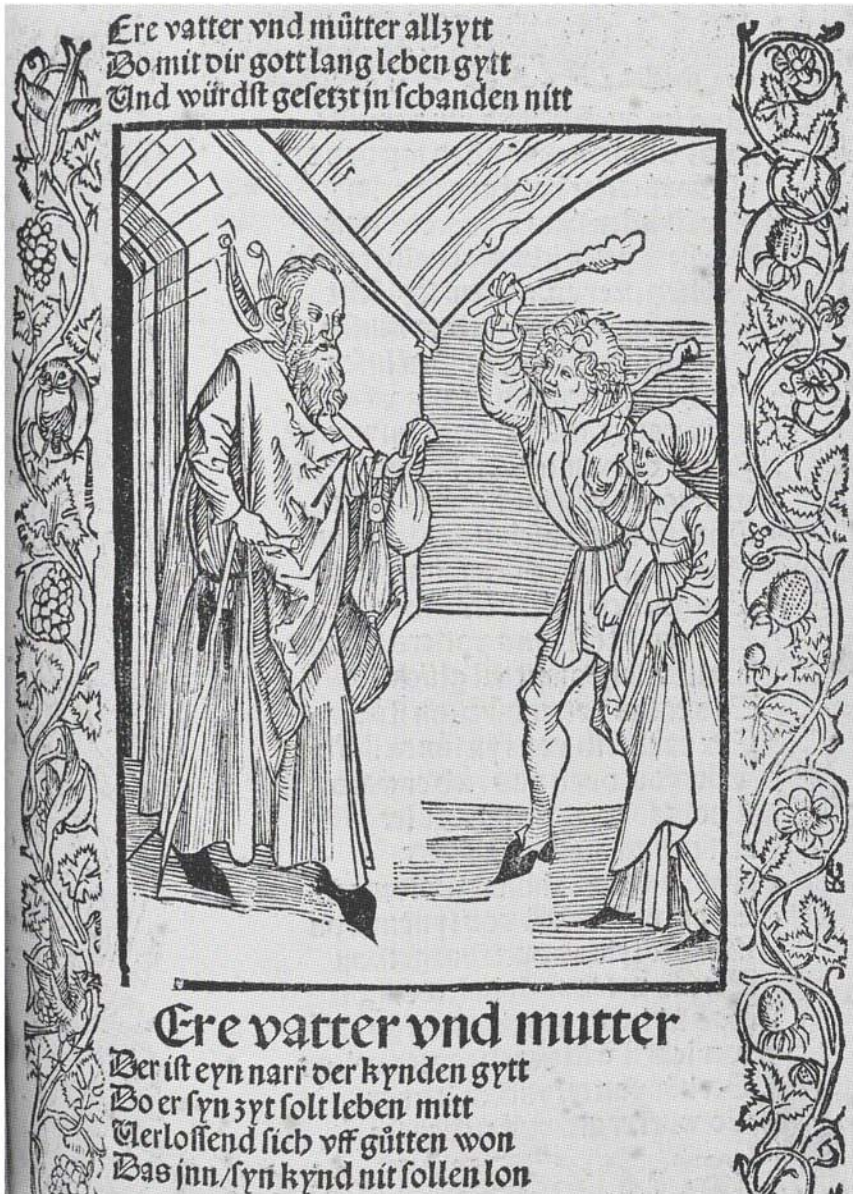


Figure 5: Anonymous, *Ere Vatter und Mutter* (Honour Father and Mother);
 from: Sebastian Brant, *Narrensch[h]iff* (Basel, 1506), ch. 89



Figure 6: Anonymous after Adriaen van de Venne, *Poor Parents, Rich Children*; from: Jacob Cats, *Houwelyck: Dat is de Gantsche Gelegentheydt des Echten Staets*



Figure 7: Adriaen Collaert after Maarten de Vos, *Jupiter/Old Age*, 1581



Figure 8: Adriaen Collaert after Maarten de Vos, *Saturnus/Very Old Age*, 1581



Figure 9: Hieronymus Wierix after Hans Vredeman de Vries,
Doric Order / 48-64 years, 1577



Figure 10: Hieronymus Wierix after Hans Vredeman de Vries,
Tuscan Order / 64-80 years, 1577



Figure 11: Anonymous after Adriaen van de Venne, *Het Houw'licks Bed zy onbesmet* (The Marriage Bed be Unbesmirched), from: Johan de Brune, *Emblemata of Zinne-werck* (1624)

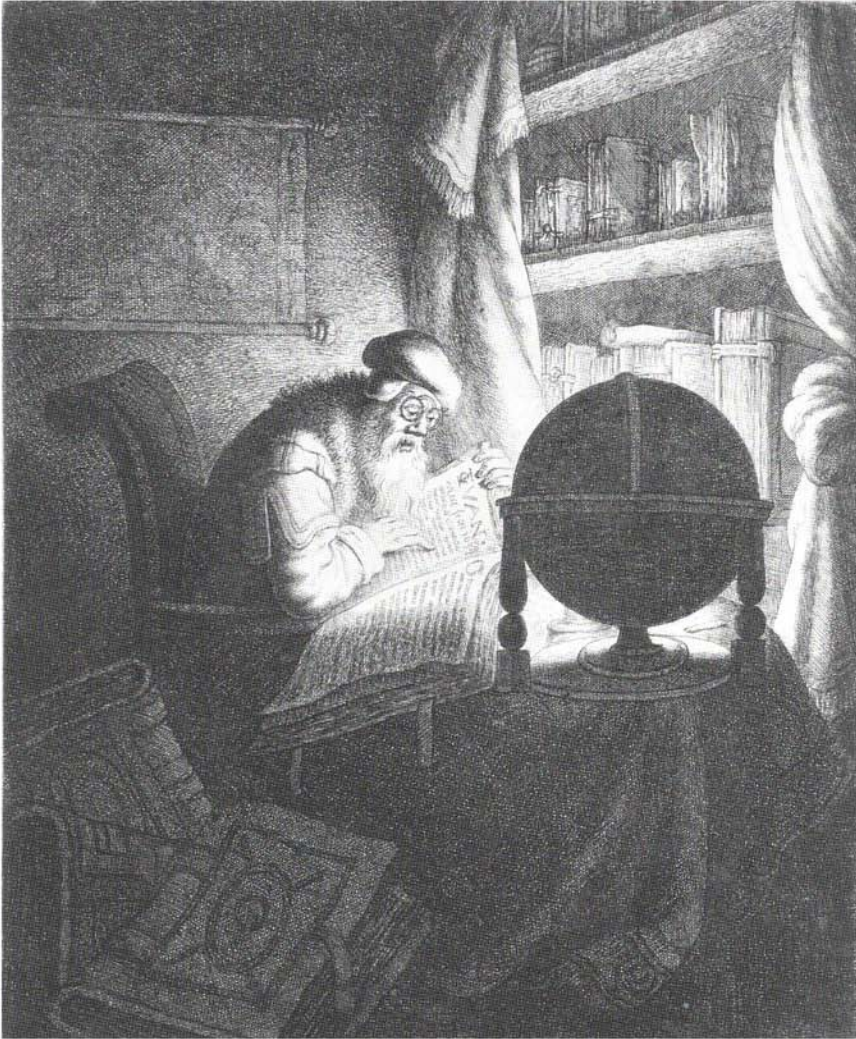


Figure 12: Rembrandt, *Saint Jerome in his Study*, 1642



A. van de Venne
Invenit.

*Sancta prius mulier canæ quam sula senectæ
Secundantur, vitæ consulit, atque deum.*

D. B. Bremden
fecit.

Figure 13: Daniël van den Bremden after Adriaen van de Venne,
Old Woman with Glasses and a Book, c. 1625-1635



Figure 14: Anonymous, *Quaere Adolescents, utere Senex* (Acquire in Youth, Enjoy in Old Age); from: Hadrianus Junius, *Emblemata*
Antwerp: Christoffel Plantijn, 1565)



Figure 15: Anonymous after Otto van Veen, *Varia Senectae Bona* (The Good Sides to Old Age are Manifold); from: *Quinti Horati Flacci Emblemata* (Antwerpen: Hieronymus Verdussen, 1607)

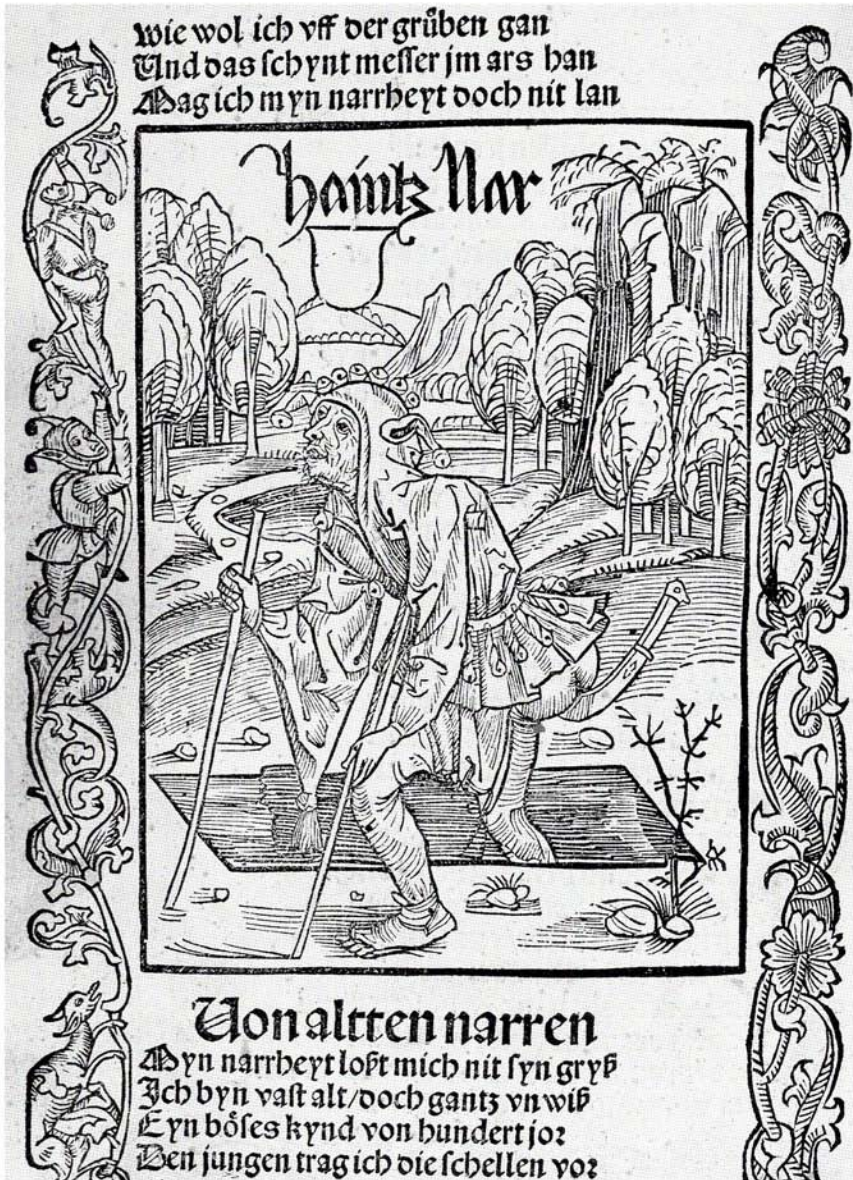


Figure 16: Anonymous, *Von alten Narren* (The Old Fool); from:
 Sebastian Brant, *Narrenschiff* (Basel, 1506)



*No contemne serm munitum, stultas pusilla,
Atq; tuam fistat brevitas parvus morum.*

L Aet loopen dien Wulp, hy fou't verquisen, al,
Comt aen mijn ey, Wildy vry van rou, zijn:
Siet ick heb v'gelt, in sacken en kisten, al,
En van al dees rijkdom, faldy heer en vrou, zijn.

*Nimete quos, offere continere, divitiisq;
Mentis, rursusq; abiecit gratia serm.* C. Solomus.

L Oop, loop, Ian Draef broeck, ghy meucht my becoren, niet,
Ick prijs dees longbelinck, hem comt de sicheer, foen:
Dat ick my eens keerde, of van Venus hooren, liet,
Ghy foudt segghen, ligt siil, t'fou my feet, doen.

Figure 17: Jan Saenredam after Hendrick Goltzius, *Unequal Lovers*, 1600, engraving, 21,2 x 27,3 cm, Hollstein 329, Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet



Figure 18: Cornelis Bloemaert after Abraham Bloemaert, *Avaritia*, ca. 1625

Martha Peacock
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Hoorndragers and Hennetasters:
The Old Impotent Cuckold as “Other” in
Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Netherlandish Art

The previous essay by Anouk Janssen stressed the international and centuries-old topical nature of the artistic themes representing old age in the Netherlands from the late sixteenth through the seventeenth centuries. The present article, while dealing with the same period in the Netherlands and with a particular subset of images of the elderly, will, on the other hand, address the specificity and relevance of these themes for the contemporary culture. Also, by pursuing a different methodological approach and raising an alternative set of questions, hence somewhat contrary to Janssen’s assertions, this essay will argue that representations of old age were a direct reflection of cultural attitudes regarding the elderly and were not simply metaphorical or proverbial traditions. Indeed, I will argue that the theme of subjugated, weak and impotent cuckolds—on many occasions humorously identified as *hoorndragers* and *hennetasters*—presented an extreme opposite to contemporary ideological constructions of the ideal male. And while such images might have also had the purpose of satirizing or moralizing against unmanly behavior, they also obviously had the effect of stereotyping and isolating the elderly man as “other” and undesirable.

While it is certain that positive and negative views regarding old age had existed since antiquity, it is dangerous, as Larry Silver has pointed out, to assign too much importance to this anachronistic influence.¹ Sporadic references to antique sources cannot account for the outpouring of prints and paintings that ridiculed old men for their weak and impotent condition particularly since the late Middle Ages. It is highly doubtful that the general populace would have taken much account of these infrequent quotations when compared with the plethora of images regarding the elderly that made no such references to antiquity. Moreover, the precise

¹ Larry Silver, *Peasant Scenes and Landscapes: The Rise of Pictorial Genres in the Antwerp Art Market* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), xvi.

semiotic associations made in antiquity were unlikely to have been accurately reconstructed by this Netherlandish culture. Authors and artists were more likely displaying their classical erudition rather than reviving antique ideologies and relating them to their audiences in the form of admonishments or advice. In addition, the audience for these prints would have been even further removed from understanding the ancient contexts for these quotations as an inscription did not provide the full text from which it was derived. Finally, one has to assume that for many of the crude and boorish prints and texts that dealt with themes of the elderly, no such noble assignments would have been made. Thus, I would suggest that while there are periodic ancient references associated with images of the elderly, it is doubtful that much of the population made such direct connections to Aristotelian notions of old age or that they applied these generally to depictions of old age. As is frequently noted by historians of the postmodern era, references to the past are “inevitably articulated in our own language; they usually reflect our concerns, our worries...”² Such was also the case in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One also has to be careful in making generalizations regarding the internationalism of these themes. While some of these prints were sold internationally, others were obviously meant for a very local audience accompanied by Netherlandish proverbial references and inscriptions. Moreover, certain themes enjoyed much greater popularity in the Netherlands than elsewhere. Further, many of these themes were also used in paintings that appear to have had a more local currency.

Therefore, I would like to investigate instead why these themes held such particular interest for Netherlandish culture at this moment in time and how they related to actual lived circumstances, irrespective of a variety of possible motif traditions and artistic commonplaces. While one must admit some influence of enduring *topoi* in relation to the comedic and moralizing aspect of these images of old men, as Janssen has argued forcefully, equal weight must be given to the notion that such themes must have had particular relevance to this culture. In addition, if these themes were not to reflect actual attitudes regarding old age, why would they have continually focused on old men in the art and drama of this period? While some of these images obviously caricature and satirize old men, making them seem less realistic, other images rather pityingly individualize and humanize them. And even satire reflects certain “real” cultural values and anxieties. In relation to the subject under discussion, Rudolf M. Dekker makes the following statement regarding the “other” in Netherlandish jokes of this era:

² Carlo Ginzburg, “Hybrids: Learning from a Gilded Silver Beaker (Antwerp, ca. 1530),” *Renaissance Go-Betweens: Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Andreas Hofele, Werner von Koppenfels. Spectrum Literaturwissenschaft, 2 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), 121–38; here 134.

"People whose status was ambiguous lent themselves to misunderstanding and comic situations precisely because they did not fit into the existing hierarchies."³

It is a unique historical moment first in Flanders and then the Dutch Republic, as Antwerp and subsequently Amsterdam went through successive golden ages with a burgeoning growth in trade and wealth. Also, both centers were in the midst of religious and then political change with the growth of Protestantism and conflicts with Catholicism. More important, middle class merchants throughout these two golden eras were seizing greater economic and social power as their wealth increased. As a result, a type of manly ideal was developed that eulogized the heroic military figure who defied the Spanish and Catholicism, as well as glorified the powerful and prosperous merchant who activated this economic growth.

In opposition to this ideal male construction, the warning theme of the powerless and subjugated old man gained significant popularity in both Netherlandish art and farce from the mid-sixteenth through the seventeenth centuries.⁴ Such men were disdained as *hoorndragers* (those who sported the cuckold's horns) and *hennetasters* (those who groped the hen because of wifely subjugation or as substitute sexual gratification due to impotency and/or an unfaithful spouse). Therefore, I would like to discuss how these early modern ideologies in the Netherlands intersected with the discourses regarding ideal male and female behavior. It is within these emerging social technologies that the category "old man" is initiated to represent all that is unmanly in the culture due to his powerlessness. Several essays in this volume confirm the notion that old age is not simply a biological category; it is also a cultural construction. Therefore, as with all cultural constructions, representations of old age, while obviously based on real experience, were also reflections of cultural ideologies. These ideologies structured definitions of what was valued and natural in society versus those

³ Rudolf M. Dekker, *Humour in Dutch Culture of the Golden Age*, transl. from the Dutch (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and New York: Palgrave, 2001), 147.

⁴ See the contribution to this volume by Sarah Gordon, dealing with old people in sixteenth-century French farce. In addition there is a great deal of literature over Power of Women and Unequal Love topoi, including: Alison G. Stewart, *Unequal Lovers: A Study of Unequal Couples in Northern Art* (New York: Abaris, 1977); Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe," *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, ed. Barbara A. Babcock (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 14790; Walter Gibson, "Bruegel, Dulle Griet, and Sexist Politics in the Sixteenth Century," *Pieter Bruegel und seine Welt*, ed. Otto Georg von Simson, Matthias Winner (Berlin: Mann, 1979), 915; Thea Vignau Wilberg, Renée Pigeaud, *Hoofse Minne en burgerlijke liefde in de prentkunst rond 1500* (Leiden: Nijhoff, 1983); Lène Dresen-Coenders, "De heks als duivelsboel," *Tussen heks en heilige: He vrouwbeeld op de drempel van de moderne tijd, 15de/16de eeuw*, ed. Petty Bange, Ellen Muller (Nijmegen: SUN, 1985), 5982; Susan L. Smith, *The Power of Women: A Topos in Medieval Art and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

aspects that were odd and “other” to the hegemonic discourse. Stereotyped “otherness” is usually a topic addressed by postcolonialist scholars describing western justifications for the subjugation of non-western peoples or by feminist scholars accounting for male dominance via gender difference.

As is the case with these human categories, however, the elderly also present a stereotyped social group that was popularly ridiculed and disdained in early modern Netherlandish visual and literary culture. While positive representations of old age were certainly produced by this culture as discussed by Janssen, less favorable notions of the elderly as simple genre figures were particularly popular in satirical prints and paintings of the era. Many of these were intended for a mass audience that would then likewise equate old age with negative concepts of folly and powerlessness. In particular, the *topoi* of *hoorndragers* and *hennetasters* were frequently represented in both paintings and prints stemming from the latter half of the sixteenth century in the Netherlands generally and increasing in popularity during the first half of the seventeenth century in the Dutch Republic specifically.⁵

As already introduced, this genealogy is important because it also follows the pattern of development for early modern capitalist and middle class culture. The sixteenth century is viewed as Antwerp’s golden age, as the city went through an economic revolution allowing it to blossom as the most important trade and culture center of northern Europe. The city attracted merchants from all over Europe and this class became the most powerful economic and social entity of the city.⁶ Thus men of the middle class began to take on the power and importance previously reserved for royalty. The new manly ideal is forcefully presented in the male portraits produced in Antwerp during this era. Portraits of well-to-do merchants and professional men at work begin to emerge, and they provide important evidence as to the ideological construction of positive male characteristics. The men are at times placed in actual professional settings rather than the abstract realms of previous portraits. They are shown with all the accoutrements of their professions and learning. Their intelligence and financial power are emphasized through these motifs and by the powerful presence of the bulky half-length figures within these professional public settings.⁷

Similarly, in the northern Netherlands professional portraits of merchants began to emerge.⁸ In addition to continuing with the impressive and powerful merchant

⁵ Martha Moffitt Peacock, “Harpies and Henpecked Husbands: The Housewife as an Image of Power in Netherlandish Art, 1550–1700,” Doctoral dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1989.

⁶ *Antwerp: Story of a Metropolis: 16th–17th century*, ed. Jan Van der Stock (Gent: Snoeck-Ducaju & Zoon, 1993).

⁷ Examples of such portraits are Jan Gossaert’s, *Portrait of a Merchant*, ca. 1520, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. and an anonymous male portrait by Joos van Cleve, ca. 1520, Rijksmuseum Twenthe, Enschede.

⁸ Maerten van Heemskerck’s *Portrait of Pieter Bicker*, 1529, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, is a northern

portrait tradition being established in Antwerp, northern artists began to develop another type of idealized male portraiture. Instead of isolating the individual man and his greatness, these group portraits established male virtues and status via the group ensemble. Of particular growing popularity was the civic militia group portrait. These militia groups were originally established to protect their various communities as is frequently indicated by their weaponry, armor, and banners.⁹ Thus the manly virtues displayed in these images were of bravery, physical strength, and fortitude.

Beginning in the late 1560's, these military companies would begin to demonstrate their physical prowess as the Netherlands began its revolt against their tyrannical Spanish Catholic overlords. During and after the Dutch Revolt, many individualized portraits of heroic soldiers appeared.¹⁰ Even William I, first prince of the newly established Republic, had himself portrayed in military garb, as did the succeeding Princes of Orange.¹¹ The establishment of a new middle-class capitalist Republic to the north attracted many of the powerful merchants and renowned scholars of the south and Antwerp in particular. Thus as Antwerp declined, the Dutch Republic entered into its golden age with the establishment of important centers for trade and culture such as Amsterdam, Haarlem and Utrecht.¹² In these communities, the continued ideology of the manly ideal persisted in the individual and group portraits of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Another phenomenon beginning in the sixteenth century was an increasing subversion of the power and hegemony of the dominant and public male ideal by a formidable, albeit unnatural seeming, female ideal. As early as 1567, Ludovico Guicciardini remarks on the public business affairs of the women of the Lowlands:

The Women governe all,
both within the doores and without,
and make all bargaines,

example of depicting the successful businessman.

⁹ See, for example, Dirck Jacobsz's *Portrait of the Kloveniers Militia Company*, 1532, Leningrad, Hermitage; Paulus Moreelse's *Officers of the Company of Jacob Hoyneck*, 1616, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; Frans Hals's and Pieter Codde's *Officers of the Company of Reynier Reael*, 1637, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; and Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn's *Officers of the Company of Frans Banning Cocq*, 1642, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

¹⁰ A print example is found in Hendrick Goltzius's *Portrait of Jan Dircksz. Schatter*, ca. 1580, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam, Hollstein 250.

¹¹ See, for example Hendrick Goltzius's portrait of *William I*, 1581, London, National Portrait Gallery, Hollstein 203.

¹² *Urban Achievement in Early Modern Europe: Golden Ages in Antwerp, Amsterdam and London*, ed. Patrick O'Brien (Cambridge: University Press, 2001).

This aspect of Netherlandish women, however, was not to be lauded. Indeed, he goes on to proclaim that these aspects:

which joyned with the naturaall desire
that Women have to beare rule,
maketh them too too imperious
and troublesome.¹³

In spite of his disdain for business women, Guicciardini does express a certain amazement at these women's abilities. In fact, many foreign travelers to the Netherlands express a similar astonishment at their power and aptitude. Fynes Moryson, for example, an English traveler who visited the Netherlands during the last decade of the sixteenth century, was also amazed by the freedoms enjoyed by Netherlandish women. He reported the following about the women:

In the morning they giue their husbandes
drincking mony in their purses, who goe abroade
to be merry where they list, leaving their wyues to
keepe the shop and sell all thinges...
they keepe their Husbandes in a kind of awe,
and almost alone, without their Husbandes
intermedling, not onely keepe their shops at home,
but exercise trafficke abroade.¹⁴

Moryson also claimed that this unnatural sociological arrangement caused the women to rule over their husbands:

It was a common thing for Wives to drive
their Husbandes and their friends out of the doores
with scolding, as if they consumed the goods
wherein they had a property with their Husbandes.
I should be too credulous, if I should thinke all
Families to be sicke of this disease; and I must
confesse, that in few other Nations all Families
are altogether free from like accidents: but I
may boldly say, that the Women of these parts,
are above all other truly taxed with this unnatural
domineering over their Husbandes.¹⁵

¹³ Ludovico Guicciardini, *The Description of the Low Countreys*, imprinted by Peter Short (London, 1593), trans. from the original *Descrittione di tutti i Paesi Bassi* (Antwerp, 1567), rpt. (Norwood: Walter J. Johnson, Inc., 1976), 15.

¹⁴ Fynes Moryson, *An Itinerary: containing his ten yeeres travell through the twelve dominions of Germany, Bohmerland, Sweitzerland [sic], Netherland, Denmarke, Poland, Italy, Turkey [sic], France, England, Scotland & Ireland*, vol. 4 (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1908), 469.

¹⁵ Moryson, *An Itinerary*, 469.

Another characteristic of specifically Dutch culture that further elucidates the meaning of *hoorndragers* and *hennetasters* was the spectacle of courageous heroines that arose out of the Netherlandish Revolt. The bravery of several women was recorded in visual and literary form throughout the seventeenth century. Particularly celebrated was the Haarlem heroine Kenau Simonsdochter Hasselaer. Her story grew to mythic proportions, as she was proclaimed a Dutch Judith who led her legion of 300 Amazonian women against the Spanish army. Recountings of her ever-increasing heroic deeds are found in histories, plays and inscriptions throughout the seventeenth century.¹⁶ Many portrayals depict Hasselaer fully armed with a pike, sword, pistol and powder horn. Silhouetted against the sky and frequently identified as "*Capitain Kenou*," she looks every bit the manly warrior. The inscriptions also proclaim her manly bravery and praise her defense of the Fatherland.¹⁷

Another such heroine was Trijn van Leemput from Utrecht who purportedly organized the female citizenry to storm the Spanish castle Vredenburg. Her legend is recounted in Beverwijk's 1643 text *Van de Wtinementheyt des Vrouwelicken Geslachts* (On the Excellence of the Female Sex). In an illustration to this text, Trijn is depicted with her band of women, carrying household weaponry, as they march forward to attack the castle seen in the background.¹⁸ With such threats to the manly ideal, it is no wonder that the hegemonic discourse was frequently found criticizing the usurping power of women and warning about its disastrous effects. Not long after the appearance of these heroine images, a paranoid patriarchal reaction occurred with an outpouring of images depicting overbearing and violent women who physically abuse their husbands, steal their trousers, and subjugate them into performing female tasks. Such a group of violent and unruly women are found in a Bosscher print from ca.1590 where women beat the men with fists and tongs, force the husbands to yield their trousers, compel the men to spin, and wave a banner that emphasizes who now has the upper hand.¹⁹ That this manifest paranoia regarding overbearing women is directly linked to the unnatural role

¹⁶ There are four excellent sources on the biography of and history over Hasselaer: J. van de Capelle, *Belangrijke stukken voor geschieden oudeidkunde; zijnde Bijlagen en aantekeningen betrekkelijk het beleg en de verdediging van Haarlem in 1572 en 1573*; C. Ekama, *Beleg en Verdediging van Haarlem in 1572 en 1573* (Haarlem: A.C. Kruseman, 1872); Gerda H. Kurtz, *Kenu Symons Dochter van Haerlem* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1956); Els Kloek, *Kenau: De heldhaftige zakenvrouw uit Haarlem (1526–1588)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2001).

¹⁷ See, for example, a print by Matthias Quad, 1573, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam, Hollstein 3; a print attributed to Remigius Hooogenberg, Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam, Hollstein 15; a painting attributed to Adam Willaerts, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

¹⁸ Johann van Beverwijk, *Van de Wtinementheyt des Vrouwelicken Geslachts* (Dordrecht: H. van Esch, 1643), book 3, 49–51.

¹⁹ This print was published by L. Boscher, *Upper Hand*, Atlas van Stolk, Rotterdam.

reversals of heroines is demonstrated in a text by Jacobus van de Vivere of 1615 that first reveres the Dutch heroines but then concludes with a judgment that he, the author, would not like to be married to such a forceful and unnatural woman because he would like to maintain his rightful male power.²⁰

There was, therefore, good reason in the minds of many Dutch men for the necessary social disdain of weak and foolish men who allowed themselves to fall prey to the stratagems of women and their lust for power over men. Indeed, old *hoorndragers* and *hennetasters* became convenient scapegoats for this dangerous power reversal in society due to their inability to domineer chauvinistically and appropriately over women. Thus, a visual and literary tradition was established that detached itself from the condition of the old man and that revealed a lack of sympathy for this deviant "other." Furthermore, it allowed for the moral subjugation of the old man because of his folly and blindness. He stood harshly condemned by several spectators: (1) the other conspirators in the deceit, (2) the author or artist who ridiculed the behavior through text and image, and (3) the viewer who was encouraged to participate in the condemnation through the outward glances of the figures or the asides to the audience in the theatrical performances. Indeed many of the images have the character of a choreographed farce through the inclusion of rhetorical gestures and exaggerated expressions. Late sixteenth-century images by Hans Lieftrinck and Pieter Pourbus, for example, situate the *hoorndrager* among other actors on a curtained stage. Thus the images become spectacles with the old men playing their circumscribed role.²¹

In general, *hoorndrager* images contain overt symbols and metaphors; moreover, they are full of exaggerated humor and caricature. The farces and images of cuckolded old men were obviously intended to get a laugh with this comical spectacle. This said, however, the images cannot help but reflect serious cultural realities in terms of ideology, even if that is conveyed with humor. In fact, the satirical nature of these images only serves to heighten the dominant patriarchal discourse that criticized old men (stereotyped as powerless) for their inability to curb female power. In this way these images helped to fabricate and sustain the hegemonic patriarchal discourse.

In contrast to the many visual metaphors of male dominance, power, and virility found in the earlier-discussed portraits, old *hoorndragers* and *hennetasters* were

²⁰ Jacobus van de Vivere, *De wintersche avonden of Nederlandsche vertellingen: Waer in verscheydene vreemdigheden, dese lest voorledene hondert jaren gebeurt . . . worden verhaelt* (Amsterdam: Dirck Pietersz, 1615), 117–19.

²¹ These two images depict scenes from the *comedia dell'arte*. The painting attributed to Pieter Pourbus is in a private collection in Paris and the print by Hans Lieftrinck is reproduced in the *Recueil de plusieurs fragments des premières comédies italiennes qui ont esté représentées en France sous le règne de Henry III: recueil dit de Fossard, conservé au Musée national de Stockholm* (Paris: Editions Duchartre et Van Bugghoudt, 1928), pl. xliiv.

caricatured as the weak opposite. Moreover, their aberrant behavior made them objects of disdain and revilement to those who supported the dominant ideology. This *topos* of a shrewish and overbearing woman enslaving a man through marriage occurs early in Netherlandish literature and art but reaches a high point in mid-sixteenth century that continues through the first half of the seventeenth century.

The husband's humiliation is overtly displayed in *hoorndrager* images through the humorous representation of a pair of horns. At times, an actual set of horns is placed over the man's head; more frequently, however, the horns are indicated by a gesture from the wife or others in the scene. Women wield their power in images of the *hoorndrager* to cheat, deceive, and subjugate their weak and impotent husbands. Thus, the deceit of adultery was seen as a frightening way in which wives exercised power over their husbands, and this adultery was most frequently conveyed in art from around 1550 through the seventeenth century by means of the old *hoorndrager* theme.

As evidenced by the many images of such deceit, the clear stereotype was that old age and cuckoldry went hand-in-hand. The van de Passes, a family of artists, took particular delight in the *hoorndrager* theme. In fact, Crispijn de Passe de Oude uses the image of the *hoorndrager* to represent old age (70) in his series of the ages of man (Fig. 1). Although an old man is seated before a table with scientific instruments and books, he is, in reality, not an intelligent man. The glasses which he wears indicate that he does not see clearly and he is particularly blind to the deceit of his young and beautiful wife. She stands next to a man in the background, who wraps one arm around her and extends the other toward the old man making horns with his first two fingers as he draws back the bed curtains. The painting of Venus and Mars with cupid on the back wall underscores the amorous and adulterous relationship between the couple. Not only does the old man receive the horn gesture from his wife's lover, but he also rather absent-mindedly gives it to himself. Furthermore, the young boy in the background holds the ox's horns over the old man's head. And finally the donkey (the most stupid of beasts) indicates through its presence that the man is a fool who refuses to see his wife's deceit. The inscription reiterates his aged state and his foolish blindness, while also acknowledging the mocking he will receive from others:

Deseror, emerito iam praemia nulla:
Senectus / Namque iuventuti est proh odiosa nimis?/
Conniventem huius sannis sed lectio crebra Me iuvat:
et segnem chartula blanda senem.

[I am deserted; now old age offers no reward to the veteran
For it is, alas, all too hateful to the young,
I, sluggish old man, close my eyes to their mocking grimaces,
But take pleasure in frequent reading and enticing scraps of paper.]



Figure 1: Crispijn de Passe I, *Ages of Man*, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Hollstein 484

This print is a revealing indicator of contemporary attitudes toward old age. First, the inscription informs the viewer that the elderly are the despised “other” to the young. Second, the old man’s folly as a willing dupe is ridiculed and disdained by the mocking gestures, expressions, and symbols in the print. Thus, the conspiring viewers, presumably not old men for whom there would be no sympathetic viewing, would also have been encouraged to find humor in and disdain for the behavior of the old man.

In a 1641 illustrated text, *Les Abus du Marriage* (The Abuses of Marriage), Crispijn de Passe II continues to pursue this theme. One example is of a Signor G. who is pictured with his money bag while glancing sideways at his wife.²² She is at the right with her young lover who amorously embraces her while making a horn gesture. The accompanying verse (in English) tells of the Signor’s love for his beautiful wife and also of her adultery:

I am a rich man, Venice knowes it, and
 A favour have I from faire Venus hand,
 I will embrace it, sweet heart, daigne a kisse
 If man or mony likes thee, here it is.
 M. Leonella his sweetheart.
 What a fond foppe is this? he’s old and tough
 Faine would he kisse, but cannot for the cough,
 Give me a lad whose yeares and parts well suites mee,
 Kisse goodman goose, for a kisse cornutes thee.²³

Once again, spectators of this scene are encouraged to ridicule and revile the impotency and folly of the old man. De Passe continues this ridicule in a song entitled the *Foolish Adulterer’s Merry Wagon Song* at the end of the book. The men are condemned for marrying these whores and are also admonished not to be fearful of their wives’ anger but to cast off this plague.

The deceived *hoorndrager* was also used in poems and song books. In an illustration to the *Nieuwen Jeucht Spiegel* (originally published in 1617), Crispijn de Passe shows a fancily dressed young woman covered with jewels.²⁴ Her hair is done up in cornutes—one of the popular fashions of the day worn by worldly women—that were particularly used in images with an amorous setting.²⁵ An old

²² Crispijn de Passe II’s text is in the Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam, Hollstein 188.

²³ Crispijn de Passe II, *Les Abus du marriage* (1641), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Hollstein 27–28.

²⁴ Crispijn de Passe, *Nieuwen Jeucht Spiegel* (1617, with later editions), 172–73. This print appeared earlier in a collection of images from Italian comedies by Crispijn de Passe after Jacques Bellange (see Ilya M. Veldman, *Crispijn de Passe and His Progeny [1564–1670]: A Century of Print Production*, transl. Michael Hoyle [Rotterdam: Sound and Vision Publishers, 2001] 144–48).

²⁵ Petrus Thys, *De Mode In Rubens’ Tijd* (Antwerp: Provinciaal Museum, 1977), 86.

bearded man, obviously infatuated by her charms, offers her a flower. The man, however, is certain to be cuckolded by his young spouse as is indicated by the ox horns which another man holds behind his head. The accompanying verses confirm this suspicion:

Hy wort meer belacht als beklaecht
 Die daer in 't houwelych hoornen draecht.
 Wat wilt ghy met ons doen arm' mans? Sprac een Goddinne,
 Wij sijn u doch zoo nut als d'Vos in 't Hoenderkot;
 Neemt ghy ons om het goet, zoo maect ghy u tot spot,
 Want niet dan wreedt verwijt, drijcht ghy 't uwen ghewinne;
 Neemt ghy een leelijc dier dat's dickmael een Sottinne,
 Die mach door ongheduylt, u mede maken sot,
 Maer sijt ghy zoo verdraeyt en van verstande bot,
 Dat ghy een schoone trout, adieu rust ende minne.
 Want boven d'onghemac, verlies, schaed', en ghekijs,
 Dat ghy arm' Mans ontfanght van een te goelijc Wif,
 Zoo draecht ghy voor ghewis, de Hoornen op de Mutse:
 maer dit woort weer versoet, om dat, die Hoornen draecht
 Wort voor den meesten deel meer belacht als beklaecht
 Stelt dan tot uwen troost de buyl teghen de blutse.

[He is more ridiculed than pitied
 Who in the marriage wears horns.
 What do you want to do with us poor man?
 A goddess said,
 We are of no more use to you than a fox in a hen coop;
 If you take us for our money, you make a mockery of yourself,
 Because nothing but cruel reproach
 threatens to be your reward;
 Take an ugly bride that is foolish many times over,
 Who will, through impatience, also make you foolish,
 But are you thus so twisted and dim-witted,
 That you marry a beautiful woman,
 then good-bye to peace and love.
 Because beyond the trouble, loss, injury and scolding,
 That you, poor man, receive from a too beautiful wife,
 You will certainly wear the horns on your cap
 But reconcile yourself with these words, because
 he who wears horns is usually more ridiculed than pitied
 Then comfort yourself by weighing the lumps against the
 bruises²⁶].

²⁶De Passe, *Nieuwen Jeucht Spiegel*, 172–73.

It is clear through this verse that the old man in the image is to be scorned and reviled. He receives no pity from the author of the verse, which would also influence subsequent readers of the text, but only a reproach for getting himself into this foolish and powerless predicament.

Another husband who wears an actual pair of horns is found in a late sixteenth-century print by Claes Jansz Clock (Fig. 2). Here a rather befuddled-looking man scratches his head while his wife, seen through an open doorway, embraces and kisses another man in the background. The dog has its head in the supper pot, because the wife has neglected her household duties in favor of her lover. The man's blindness and folly are indicated by the symbol of the owl and by the inscription below:²⁷

Hier is d'hont inde pot //
 En een ander bij t'wijff //
 Is t'niet te beclaeghen /
 Dat ic tot schant en spot //
 als een catijff //
 de hoornen moet draegen.

Here is the hound in the pot
 And another with the wife
 Is it not to complain
 That I to my shame and ridicule
 As a cow
 Must wear the horns.

Yet again, the old man is mocked, scorned and shunned as foolish for his inability to control his wife.

Images of the *hoorndrager* frequently include several other figures who are aware of the deceit as was the case in the theatrical images discussed earlier. These enlightened figures enhance the mocking attitude toward the duped old cuckold as in an early seventeenth-century painting attributed to Jan Miense Molenaer.²⁸ Having just arrived, the old man is unaware of the deceit that occurred during his absence and which is indicated by the horn gestures and teasing expressions of the other figures. It is a kitchen scene in which an old man in a fur hat embraces his young wife busy scrubbing a pot. The man has apparently just returned home, as his walking stick and basket of eggs lie on the floor near him. Both of these elements are references to his old age as he needs the stick to help him walk and the eggs, as I will discuss below, indicate that he is an impotent *hennetaster*. The

²⁷ A Netherlandish proverb relating the owl to blind folly is found in Gabriel Rollenhagen's *Nucleus Emblematum* (Utrecht: 1613), 95.

²⁸ This painting is located in the Statens Museum, Copenhagen.



Figure 2: Claes Jansz Clock, *Hoorndrager*, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Hollstein 19



Figure 3: Philip Koninck, *Hoorndrager Pendant*, Collection Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RDK), The Hague



Figure 4: Philip Koninck, *Hoorndrager Pendant*, Collection Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RDK), The Hague

deceit which took place during his absence is indicated by the gestures and glances of the other figures. His wife looks past him and smiles at a young man standing behind his back. Hidden from the old man's view, he makes the horn gesture with his first two fingers and smiles at the wife. Another figure who joins in the mockery of the old man is an old woman standing behind the young man as she also makes the horn gesture. Two other figures enter through the open doorway and they too mock the deceived old man. Thus, as usual, everyone but the old man is aware that he is a *hoorndrager*, including the viewer.

References to *hoorndragers* also occur frequently in the popular farces of the period. In the 1659 farce *Bedroge Jalouzy* (Deceived Jealousy), Catrijn is not only an adulteress, she is also an angry abusive wife. In the opening scene, Catrijn scorns her husband Rombout by calling him an old *hoorndrager*, by challenging his authority, and by committing adultery behind his back. Meanwhile, Rombout tells his servant to keep watch and inform him of his wife's activities. Karel, Catrijn's lover, meets Rombout on the street and deceitfully chats generally about women who are unfaithful to their husbands. Afterwards, he slyly informs the audience that he will now go to Catrijn, but only after he goes home to check on his own wife's faithfulness. Ironically, Neeltje (Karel's wife) is also committing adultery with a notary named Gerbrant. Eventually, Rombout comes home early, and Karel has to hide in a cupboard. Rombout, who knows he is there, sends for Gerbrant and Neeltje to certify that Karel and Catrijn were together. Karel promises fidelity to Neeltje in the future and blames the affair on the tempting Catrijn. Gerbrand, who has settled the quarrel, walks away chuckling to himself at his cleverness in making two foolish cuckolds. Gerbrand, therefore, plays the role of the clever and virile ideal male who escapes blameless while the old *hoorndragers* are condemned as foolish and deceived.²⁹

This type of complicated and comical adultery seems to be the subject of pendant paintings by Philip Koninck (Figs. 3 and 4) from ca. 1650. In the left painting, a grinning man leans out a half-door, while looking to the right and gesturing behind him to his wife. She, however, also wears a sly grin as she casts a devious glance toward her husband. Moreover, she subtly directs a *hoorndrager* gesture at him with her second and fifth fingers. The indication that both spouses are committing adultery is made clear in the pendant, where another grinning wife leans out a half-door to meet the gaze of the man in the pendant. In the background, her husband also grins as he knowingly looks out at the viewer and stuffs his finger in his pipe—obviously a crude sexual gesture. Evidently the four deceived and deceitful figures are all committing adultery with one another's

²⁹ Joost van Breen, *Bedroge Jalouzy* (Amsterdam: Jacob Lescaille, 1659), A2.

spouses in this love quadrangle. Only the viewer is aware of and can ridicule their foolishness.

Koninck also depicts a *hoorndrager* (1649) in which only the woman and her lover are aware of the deceit.³⁰ The wife sits in the center of the image with her foot resting on a stove and a drinking glass on her knee. She looks up at a man who sticks his head through a small door and smiles at him while making a horn gesture. Hidden by the open door, he smiles back at her. In the shadowy background, we see the poor old cuckold whom they deceive.

Other sexual metaphors are used in a mid-seventeenth-century painting by Jan Steen.³¹ The scene takes place outdoors near a dovecote. Sprawled out in the foreground are a young man and woman who wear the clothes of shepherd and shepherdess. They take seeds from a dish on the young man's knee to feed a bird perched on the woman's arm. They are surrounded by several objects which act as sexual metaphors. A large, rounded vessel with the female dove atop it is clearly a female sexual reference.³² Preening himself for her inspection is a male bird that fans out its tail. The two birds on top of the cage literally act out the suggested sexual activity. Moreover, the mere presence of the birds indicates the erotic intent. Since de Jongh's pioneering article, there has been much discussion of the association of the terms "*vogel*" (bird) and "*vogelen*" (slang for 'to copulate') with birds and sexual innuendo in art.³³ While the foreground portrays a pleasant, pastoral scene of *young* lovers, the stooped old man in the background creates an uneasy presence. One might assume that this voyeuristic man is merely watching a pair of lovers; however, another element suggests that this is a cuckolded spouse. The horns of the cow, which are juxtaposed with the man's head, imply that the man is a *hoorndrager*. Beyond this the image mocks him as an old impotent husband as well due to the hen that he gropes, thus also making him a *hennetaster*.

Turning now to the *hennetaster* images, it will become clear that the two themes regarding old men often overlapped in terms of symbolic metaphors and intent. Around mid-sixteenth century, the expression *hennetaster* becomes popular in both literature and art. *Vanden hinnentastere* (Of the hen groper) (ca.1550), for example, is a text which stresses the importance of a sexual division of tasks. *Hennetaster* (hen groper) was therefore the name given to men who busied themselves with women's work since the feeling of the hen for eggs was considered a female task and thus inappropriate for men. On the title page, the old husband is represented

³⁰ This painting is located in the City Art Gallery, Manchester.

³¹ This painting was auctioned in London at Sotheby's 10-07-2003, lot 25.

³² Eddy de Jongh, "Erotica in vogelperspectief: De Dubbelzinnigheid van een reeks 17de eeuwse genrevoorstellingen," *Simiolus* 3.1 (1968-1969), 22-74; here 45; see also Gaby Herchert, "*Acker mir mein bestes Feld*": Untersuchungen zu erotischen Liederbuchliedern des späten Mittelalters (Münster and New York: Waxmann, 1996), 223-24.

³³ Eddy de Jongh, "Erotica in vogelperspectief," 47-72.

grasping a hen while his wife stands in the next frame in a scolding position. The text tells of a farmer who returns from his work in the fields only to find that his wife has not yet prepared his dinner. Angered by her husband's subsequent scolding, the wife suggests they reverse roles for a day. She instructs her husband that he must follow a certain regimen in completing the household tasks: he must feed the cows and sweep their hay, clean the stable, milk the cows, goats and sheep, churn the milk and form the butter into two pound pieces, make the bread, feed the geese, chickens and pigs, care for the roosters and pigeons, brew the beer, tend the child and rock it when it cries, wash diapers, clean the house, make the bed, give water to the calves, and finally have a warm meal ready when she comes home from the fields.

The wife goes to the fields the next day and performs the farmer's work; when she returns that evening, she finds the house in utter chaos. The child and animals are howling because they have not been cared for, the diapers floated away as the husband was washing them in the river and as he was milking the cow, it peed on him. The story concludes with the warning that men should not engage in female work because men are, by nature, not meant for women's work. Moreover, men are ridiculed for their folly in engaging in such feminine tasks—actually an old literary tradition, but obviously also of great topical relevance in the early modern age.³⁴

The *hennetaster* theme begins to take on visual form in works like Pieter Bruegel's 1559 painting of *Netherlandish Proverbs*.³⁵ At the left side of the painting, near the wall stands a man who feels the underside of a hen, a *hennetaster*, checking for its eggs. The globe turned upside down, or topsy-turvy world, above these scenes emphasizes the illogical and ridiculous nature of the various activities taking place, including the unnaturalness of domineering women who force their husbands to perform female tasks.

More explicit in its ridicule of *hennetasters* is a print from the latter half of the sixteenth century by Hans Liefvrick.³⁶ The image pictures a hunch-shouldered old man who grasps a hen and glances back at his wife standing in the open doorway. She gestures at the chickens pecking in the yard, as if pointing out the husband's duties to him. A rooster who stands above and in the center of its mates looks at the old man with incredulity, as if it represents the proper order and the man the reversed order of nature. The text addresses men who themselves play the *hennetaster* role and admonishes them to be masters in their own households:

³⁴ Herman Pleij discusses both the story and its moral in "Taakverdeling in het huwelijk", *Literatuur* 3 (1986): 66–67.

³⁵ This painting is located in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin-Dahlem.

³⁶ This print is located in the Museum Plantin-Moretus/Stedelijk Prentenkabinet, Antwerp.

Ten is gheen wonder, al gaet de weerelt verdraeyt
 En dat de hinne bouen den haen nu craeyt;
 Want siet niemant en es te vreden in tsijne,
 Den man mans wercken schier gheheel versmaeyt
 Ende int werck sijns wijfs verfraeyt,
 Eer coockolueris, een hinnentaster wort hi ten fyne.
 Dus en ist niet vreemt, datmen nu ten termyne
 Quaey wijfs veel vint niet om vercloecken,
 Want de mans sijn oersaeck, datterveel dragen de broecken.
 Ghe hinnentasters, laet de wijffs haer werck bedriuen,
 Ghi gortentelders, ghi sijt de saecke van tkijuen
 Vvs wijfs, diet al wilt stellen na v hant.
 Laetet dwijff thuys regeren, wint ghi slechts de schiuen,
 Daer men mede mach huys houwende bliuen.
 Hebt v als een man ghebruycet reden verstant,
 Regeert v als meester ws huys, de reden want,
 Soo sal sij v ontsien ende huer niet teghen v stellen,
 Oft anders soo sal sij v inden torfhoeck vellen,
 Wat batet, dat ghi haer in huer werck wilt berichten!
 Tprofijt, datter af comps, is kyuen en vichten,
 Verstoort van sinnen, nemmermeer goet woort.
 Maer wildy wysselijck dit al beslichten,
 Laetet dwijff gheworden, als sij niet en stichten,
 Dat onbehoorlijck is, hout met malcanderen accoort,
 De vrouwe is een cranck vaetken, licht ghestoort.
 Dus doet v werck en leeft by rade,
 Op dat v int leste niet en vergae tot quade!

[It is no wonder if the world goes topsy-turvy
 When the hen crows above the cock;
 Because it sees no one who is satisfied with what he has,
 The husband almost wholly spurns man's work
 And busies himself with his wife's work,
 He becomes a cuckold and a *hennentaster*.
 Is it not strange that one now finds
 Many bad wives who are not ruled
 The husbands are the reason that many of them wear the pants.
 You hen gopers, let the wives do their work,
 You grain counters, you are the cause of your wife's scolding.
 You who want to have everything go your way.
 Let the wife rule the house,
 There she may in householding remain.
 If you as a man used reason, and understanding,
 If you rule as master in your house,
 Then she will respect you for this, and will not go against you,

Otherwise she will cut you down.
 What is the use of wanting to advise her in her work!
 All that comes from it is scolding and fighting,
 Disturbing of senses, never a good word.
 But if you want to settle all this wisely,
 Let the wives do what they want, as long as they do not
 do anything improper,
 Remain on good terms with each other,
 The wife is a weak vessel who is easily disturbed.
 Thus, do your work and live by this advice,
 So that you will not (in the end) degenerate into evil.]

Thus the foolish old man is twice reviled—once for his cuckoldry and then for his inability to rule his wife and establish his patriarchal rule. Bad wives were considered likely to take advantage of such weak husbands in terms of both sexual and physical subjugation. This unnatural role reversal was rebuked as a situation that would lead to domestic and societal chaos. The abomination of weak and foolish men is firmly expressed in the inscription at the top:

Al omme soe zijn si wel om verfoeyen
 De hinnenastasters die huer dwijfs werck moyen.

[There are some who are so abhorred,
 The *hennetasters*, who busy themselves with their wives'
 work.]

In a print by Harmen Muller, the wife is even more firmly shown to be the boss over her husband (Fig. 5). This print dates from around the turn of the sixteenth century and it has been suggested that the print is probably after a drawing by the artist's son Jan Muller.³⁷ Filling the foreground of the print, the husband gropes a hen while eyeing the viewer. In the background his wife sits in the open doorway of their cottage. She is in the process of putting on her husband's trousers. By concerning himself with women's work, he has allowed her to seize both his trousers and his authority, allowing her to "wear the pants in the family." The inscription warns other men about the dangers of role reversal in the marriage:

Comt hier ghy Hennenastasters en Gortentellers ghierich,
 Die een turff aen vijfven, een hair aen drien wilt cloven :
 Leert aen desen Jan Hen, en schickt u manierich,
 Off tivyff zal u oock vanden broeck beroven.

³⁷ E. K. J. Reznicek, "Jan Harmensz. Muller als Tekenaar," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 7 (1956): 65–121; here 92–93.



Figure 5: Harmen Muller, *Henketaster*, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Hollstein 125

[Come here, you miserly clutchers of hens and counters of
 barley,
 whoever wants to split a block of peat into five, a hair into
 three:
 Learn from this Jan Hen and mind your manners,
 or the wife will rob you of your trousers too.]³⁸

Another *hennetaster* who weakly submits to the physical power of his wife is represented in a print by Julius Goltzius, of the late sixteenth century.³⁹ A man, somewhat dull-witted in appearance, grasps a hen while glancing back at his wife with a certain amount of trepidation. Ostensibly, he is moving out of the way of his wife's upraised arm, poised for a blow against her husband. The awkwardness of the wife's upraised hand and the emphasis placed upon it may be an indication that in addition to signifying violence against the husband, the artist intended this gesture as a reference to the turning upside down of the proper position of the man having the upper hand. The use of the hen as a metaphor for the woman is probably the intent of this artist as well. While the wife in this scene does not display the exaggerated anger witnessed in other images, the hen, with its wagging tongue and scornful gaze, does exhibit these typically shrewish characteristics. The inscription, which is in German and somewhat uneasily squeezed into its position, may be a later addition. In any case, it merely reiterates the foolish and topsy-turvy nature of a husband who carries out the female chores and lets his wife have the upper hand:

Der Hennentaster
 Du bist ein wunderlicher gast
 Das du das tasten hast so fast.

[You are an odd fellow
 Because you have thus firmly groped this (hen).]

Even more pitiable is a mid-seventeenth-century *hennetaster* painted by Barent Fabritius representing the sense of touch in a series on the five senses.⁴⁰ A very old, bearded, and balding man holds a hen with his left hand, while feeling its underside for eggs with his right hand. The ancient figure, set against a dark background, is gravely solemn in his task, almost reverent. In the background is a rooster perched on a nest—another sign of role reversal. Thus, the rooster has been relegated to the female task of brooding the eggs. Both males have been forced to do the work of their mates.

³⁸ Translation by Anne W. Lowenthal in her *Joachim Wtewael and Dutch Mannerism*. *Aetas aurea: Monographs on Dutch & Flemish Painting*, 6 (Doornspijk: Davaco Publishers, 1986), 139.

³⁹ This print is located in the Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam, Hollstein 49–52.

⁴⁰ This painting is located in the Suermondt Museum, Aachen.

Art and literature of the era ridiculed men who allowed their wives to abuse them in this way, as in a print from a series by Herman Saftleven. It belongs to a series of peasant representations where the figures are shown engaged in various foolish activities. The image depicts a feeble-minded looking peasant who holds a hen with the accompanying inscription "*hennetaster*."⁴¹ The man's appearance underscores the imprudence of his activity.

Another incident of role reversal between shrewish wives and weak husbands can be seen in an anonymous print of the late sixteenth century.⁴² In a metaphoric reference to the female task of rearing children, the mannish-looking wife examines one of the eggs brooded by her bare-bottomed husband. The scorned husband sits miserably atop his basket, and the inscription further ridicules the unnatural role reversal while also indicating the enduring nature of the man's humiliation:

Och Gooisen tis hier verdriet Ick en sien de
Hiekenne, Och Ghyse en sinse noch niet geenoch.

[Oh Gooisen it is misery here, I don't see the hen,
Oh Ghijse says it is not yet long enough.]

A similar reference seems to be the subject of a scene from a print entitled *AFBEELDINGH HOE SEVEN WYVEN VECHTEN OME EEN MANS BROEK ENDE HOE DE VROU DE BROEK AEN TRECHT EN DE MAN DEN ROCK* (REPRESENTATION OF HOW SEVEN WIVES FIGHT OVER A MAN'S PANTS AND HOW THE WOMAN PUTS ON THE PANTS AND THE MAN THE SKIRT) (Fig 6). Thus this print contains several different representations of henpecked husbands and subjugating wives. In the ninth scene of this print, a man is shown holding an egg and looking down at a hen. The hen does not sit on the nest placed in front of it and the inscription underneath explains why: "*HY SIET OP HET EY EN LAET HET HOEN LOOPEN*" (HE SEES TO THE EGG AND LETS THE HEN RANGE). The wife disregards her female duties and leaves her husband to sit on the nest and hatch the egg. Again, this is a metaphoric reference for the man taking over the female task of raising children and is yet another scene which reproves and ridicules powerless men.

Caring for hens and eggs is often the task assigned to men who are ruled by their wives both in literature and art. In the farce *Eenen man ende een wijf ghecleet up zij boersche* (A man and a wife dressed up in the peasant fashion, ca. 1560), a peasant couple quarrel on their way to market. The husband has to carry the basket of eggs and his wife mocks him, while he complains that all women want

⁴¹ Herman Saftleven's print is located in the Rijksprentenkabinet, Amsterdam, Hollstein 9.

⁴² This anonymous print is located in the print cabinet at the University of Leiden.



Figure 6: Anonymous, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

to rule their husbands. She makes him feel in the basket under the hen and charges him, "*Nu tast, hinnentastere*" (Now grope, hennetaster).⁴³

Pendant paintings by Abraham Bloemaert, dated 1632, recall the scene described in *Eenen man ende een wijf ghecleet up zij boersche*.⁴⁴ The paintings obviously represent a couple carrying their goods to market with the wife scolding and nagging along the way. In the right pendant, a woman stands with a walking stick. She is placed before an old shed with a large jug tied to her back and a basket over one arm. She stands in the familiar scolding pose—bent forward with her finger upraised toward her husband, who is found in the pendant. In an attitude of long-suffering endurance, the man leans against a tree trunk and a large rock, gazing off in the distance and immune to her scolding tirades.

The reason for the wife's chastisement is made evident in this case by the presence of broken eggs, suggesting that when husbands were forced to do women's work they often did it very badly. The husband in Bloemaert's painting has obviously not been careful with the contents of his basket, as a few eggs have fallen out and broken open, while others lie cracked in the basket.

The subject of the *hennetaster* was frequently treated by Bloemaert and was continued by his sons. Indeed, the theme became rather common among Utrecht artists generally. The typical presentation of the *hennetaster* was an old man depicted half-length and grasping a hen. As in the previously discussed pendants, these men are pitiable in their groping of the hen. The connection with the pendants is also significant, because it appears that *hennetasters* probably frequently occurred with half-length images of women carrying other references to poultry, either eggs or cocks.

Jan van Bijlert, another Utrecht artist, also painted a rather lamentable *hennetaster*.⁴⁵ A very solemn and mournful-looking old man is here set against a blank background, seated at a table. His sad gaze off the right of the painting suggests that perhaps there was a pendant depicting a female.

Joachim Wtewael, also an Utrecht artist, painted such a *hennetaster* pairing, but only the pendant of the *hennetaster* survives in the original.⁴⁶ Wtewael, whose art has much in common with that of Bloemaert, depicts a half-length old *hennetaster* fumbling a hen while resting his other hand on a basket of eggs. Even more than his previously witnessed fellow gropers, this figure evokes great sympathy, as he sadly looks at the viewer with a weary expression.

⁴³ Wilma van Engeldorp Gastelaars, "Ik Sal U Smiten Op Uwen Tant: Geweld tussen man en vrouw in laatmiddeleeuwse kluchten," Doctoral dissertation, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1984, 18.

⁴⁴ These pendant paintings are located in the Centraal Museum, Utrecht.

⁴⁵ This painting is in a private collection. Photo located in the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie.

⁴⁶ The pendant survives only in a copy. The *hennetaster* painting is located in the Staatlichen Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe.

In a print by Cornelis Bloemaert after a painting by his father, Abraham, and a drawing by his brother, Hendrik (Fig. 7), other meanings of the term *hennetaster* are made clear. This print portrays a half-length peasant who grasps a hen in his arms. At his right elbow is a straw basket with a strap wrapped around the handle and to the left is a bird trap. Underscoring the man's mournful appearance is the rather pathetic inscription:

Siet hoe den ouden voelt het hoen
Een droge queen wil oock wat doen.

[See how the old man feels the hen,
A dried up old woman would also like something to do.]⁴⁷

Here the term "woman" (*queen*) is certainly used as a nickname for an impotent man. This can be inferred from the fact that *quene* also stands for bagpipe (the symbol for male genitals), thus "*Een droge Queen*" can also be read as "dried up male genitals."⁴⁸ The old man is therefore left to seek sexual pleasure through the groping of the hen. His wife denies him such pleasure because of his impotence. Jan Grauls points to the association of the *hennetaster* with lustful men through his examination of two pendant prints by the Monogrammist HSD.⁴⁹ Such references are probably also implied in a rather licentious looking *hennetaster* by Cornelis Saftleven.⁵⁰ His rather lecherous grin suggests this intent. Thus lustful old *hennetasters* were made miserable when, due to their wives' adultery, they were left to seek sexual pleasure through the groping of the hen.

In the farce *Lippijn*, the wife not only mistreats her husband physically and forces him to do female chores, she also makes him a cuckold. Lippijn is so weakened from his drinking and his old age that his wife is able to rule over him completely. She makes him do all the household work while she goes out to

⁴⁷ The *hennetaster* must have been a familiar folk character; he appears in the program for a public procession in Antwerp in 1563. The short verse that describes him is reminiscent of Bloemaert's inscription:

Een oude Quene, die nau ghaen en kan,
Die sou wel begheeren, eenen ionghen man.

Pamphlet 131, Koninklijk Bibliotheek, The Hague, after A2.

⁴⁸ I am grateful for the help of Herman Pleij in suggesting the connection between bagpipes and the word "quene" in a letter dated July 4, 1989. The definition for "queen" as an old woman is given in *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (1882–), vol. 8 pt. 1:744.

⁴⁹ Jan Grauls, *Volkstaal en Volksleven in het Werk van Pieter Bruegel* (Antwerp and Amsterdam: N.V. Standaard-Boekhandel, 1957), 141–47.

⁵⁰ The present location of this painting is unknown. Photo located in the Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie.



Figure 7: Cornelis Bloemaert after Hendrick Bloemaert, *Hennetaster*,
 Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Hollstein 290

commit adultery. Therefore, the unnatural power of a woman over an old and powerless husband is twice referred to in these works.⁵¹

This interpretation of motifs and gestures is supported in the more obviously suggested elements of probable pendants by Jan Hattigh Baak (1619–1665). The two works, although not previously designated as such, form pendants very similar in format and subject to those of Bloemaert and Wtewael. Baak was also an artist working in Utrecht, who certainly appears to have been influenced by the two older artists in these paintings. In the right painting, the familiar old *hennetaster* is pictured in half-length (Fig. 8). The old man grasps the hen in his left hand, while holding its egg in his right hand. The egg is an element that may refer to the impotence of the man.⁵² His impotence and age have made him less satisfactory to his young wife; therefore, it is necessary for her to look elsewhere for an able lover. His mournful expression further emphasizes his plight as a cuckolded, lustful old man, and one who is ruled by his young wife.

The pendant provides even greater evidence as to the meaning of these works (Fig. 9). It represents a young woman in half-length facing the other painting. Unlike her spouse, she gleefully smiles out at the viewer. Her smile and gestures reveal that this is another instance of a wife wielding power over her husband. With her right hand she makes the most telling gesture of all. Her two outermost fingers are raised, thus making a signification of horns, which are pointed directly at the man's head. There is no doubt that the woman has made a *hoorndrager* out of her husband. With her sexual power she has trapped him due to her youth and beauty but has cuckolded him, thus making of him a *hennetaster* and a *hoorndrager* at the same time. In addition, the feather over the ear of Baak's male figure forms a distinct horn thus indicating that his impotence and age have caused his wife to look elsewhere for an able lover. With her left hand she pins the rooster's feet together, which is probably another reference to the man's powerlessness.

These and many other instances of humiliated and scorned *hoorndragers* and *hennetasters* in early modern visual and literary culture of the Netherlands certainly must have contributed to a general sense of the unmanly, impotent, and powerless state of old men. While there were certainly positive representations of the elderly, it seems difficult to believe that *hoorndrager* and *hennetaster* imagery did not take a heavy toll on the reputations of old men. They became type-cast in roles that engendered derision and ridicule from critical audiences who could laugh at the comic subjugation, while also harshly disdaining the pictured subject. These old men were the foolish and impotent "other" to the Netherlandish manly ideal. Situating such representations of doddering and powerless old men within

⁵¹ Gastelaars, "Ik Sal U Smitten," 17.

⁵² The use of eggs as aphrodisiacs is discussed in *Tot Lering en Vermaak. Betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1976), 250–52.



Figure 8: Jan Hattigh Baak, *Hennetaster Pendant*, Centraal Museum, Utrecht,
Present Location Unknown



Figure 9: Jan Hattigh Baak, *Hennetaster Pendant*, Centraal Museum, Utrecht

the common visual culture of these new emerging middle-class societies reveals just how much these characters would have been viewed as symbols of the deviant “other.” From mid-sixteenth century on, the art increasingly exuded a sense of male strength and significance. Indeed, representations of the contemporary Netherlandish merchant or soldier carried connotations of political, economic and even physical power that spread across the globe. Evidence of this collective male power can be found in the numerous singular and group portraits of the era, whether one is viewing the brave heroics of the militia companies or the economic might of individual merchants or their collective guilds. Like all stereotypes of the “other,” it did not matter whether the actual lives of the aged corresponded to these symbols—they were simply the humiliated fall-out of the hegemonic discourse and its attempts to distinguish between cultural norms and their odd deviations.⁵³

⁵³ For further literary examples reflecting this profound gender discourse within marriage during the late Middle Ages, see Albrecht Classen, *Der Liebes- und Ehediskurs vom hohen Mittelalter bis zum frühen 17. Jahrhundert*. Volksliedstudien, 5 (Münster, New York, et al.: Waxmann, 2005), 108–326.

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A Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man— with Emphasis on Titian

When should the elderly artist gracefully retire? In the second (1568) edition of his *Lives*, Giorgio Vasari observed of the aging Tiziano Vecellio (Titian) (1488–1576) that “Ha guadagnato assai, perchè le sue opera gli sono state benissimo pagate; ma sarebbe stato ben fatto che in questi suoi ultimi anni non avesse lavorato se non per passatempo, per non scemarsi, coll’opere manco buone, la riputazione guadagnatasi negli anni migliori, e quando la natura per la sua declinazione non tendeva all’imperfetto” (“He has earned a great deal of money because his paintings have always commanded high prices; but during these last few years he would have done well not to have worked save to amuse himself, for then he would have avoided damaging with inferior work the reputation won during his best years before his natural powers started to decline”).¹ Vasari states unequivocally that Titian had accumulated sufficient wealth and that working on public commissions was no longer a financial necessity for the artist. The message is clear. Titian should have ceased to work on public commissions whilst his star was in its ascendancy.

To counter Vasari’s admonition, this essay proposes that Titian provided a model for the elderly artist wishing to practice in old age. This model may be found in his own late, uncommissioned, self-portraits and in an altarpiece, also containing a self-portrait, intended for his own tomb. In the former I suggest that Titian forged a dignified identity for the elderly artist through self-representation. In the latter he created a spiritual prototype based on meditating on the dead body of Christ. This provided a compelling model for future generations of Venetian

¹ Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de’ più eccellenti pittori scultori ed architettori scritte da Giorgio Vasari*. Con nuove annotazioni e commenti di Gaetano Milanesi Volume 7, (1906; Florence: Sansoni Editore, 1981), 459; for the English translation see: Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, A Selection Translated by George Bull, Volume 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 462.

artists beginning with Titian's younger contemporary Jacopo Robusti (Tintoretto) (1518–1594).²

To frame my narrative I shall begin by underlining the broader contexts for this case history. So as to understand why it was considered important that the aging artist should withdraw from making public commissions at a certain time of life, a preamble is required on fifteenth and sixteenth-century attitudes toward and art theoretical debates on the image and status of the artist. Furthermore it is also important to explore how old age could be regarded as a possible hindrance to the artist's social standing. As well as introducing these ideas this essay will address sixteenth-century notions of longevity and briefly consider the view that Venice was an environment in which old age was particularly privileged.

* * *

Fifteenth and sixteenth-century ideas concerning the age at which one became old were quite different from our own. Drawing upon diverse genres of sixteenth and seventeenth-century texts Creighton Gilbert addresses this issue in his article "When Did a Man in the Renaissance Grow Old?"³ The basis of Gilbert's enquiry arose from a patent issued by the Duke of Parma in January 1562 appointing a new architect to work in tandem with Giacomo Vignola "so as to subtract labor from his years".⁴ The fact that Vignola was aged just 54 at the time struck Gilbert as extraordinary. Further research revealed that in a letter to Domenico Boninsegni, the business agent of his Medici patrons, Michelangelo claimed to be old when aged 42. Yet he went on to live for an additional 47 years.⁵ In an analysis of when the artists featured in Vasari's biography died, Gilbert observes that 40 was not considered untimely by the author. Those artists who died in their thirties were still described by Vasari as dying prematurely. This observation, along with a reference to an excerpt from Thomas Elyot's medical handbook *The Castle of Health*, reveals that there appeared to be neither the concept of nor the vocabulary for

² In his introduction Albrecht Classen alludes to a current flowering of interest in Old Age Studies from a cultural-historical perspective. He refers to two recent symposia addressing the theme of Old Age. One took place at the *Institut für Realienkunde des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit* in Krems an der Donau, October 16–18, 2006 and another, the meeting of the *German Academy of Language and Poetry*, in Darmstadt, October 19–21, which was dedicated to "Radikalität des Alters" (Radicality of Old Age).

³ Creighton Gilbert, "When Did a Man in the Renaissance Grow Old?" *Studies in the Renaissance* 14 (1967): 7–32.

⁴ Gilbert, "When did a Man in the Renaissance Grow Old?," 7.

⁵ Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Le Lettere di Michelangelo Buonarroti. Pubblicate coi ricordi ed contratti artistici per cura di Gaetano Milanesi*, (Florence: Comitato Fiorentino per le Feste del IV. Centenario della Nascita di Michelangelo, 1875), 384.

'middle age.'⁶ There simply was youth, maturity and old age. This, however, was just one way of periodizing the life of man. There were various ages of life traditions, both textual and visual.⁷ These could consist of anything between four ages (corresponding with the seasons) to seven (coordinating with the planets) or even twelve (the months of the year) and other permutations in between.⁸ However, the youth-maturity and old age cycle is also borne out visually in the well-known pictorial theme of *The Three Ages of Man*.⁹ It first emerged in Venice in a painting by Giorgione which shows a boy holding a sheet of music, a mature man to the left of the boy possibly instructing him and a much older man gazing out of the picture. The same theme is translated quite differently in a painting by Titian. He shows a landscape with a *putto*, symbolizing childhood, and two sleeping babies to the right. To the left is a pair of youthful lovers and, in the middle distance, a white-haired, balding and bearded old man sits alone, contemplating two skulls and, presumably, his own mortality. Thus these pictorial examples corroborate the textual evidence and Gilbert's hypothesis that the notion of middle age would not have been readily understood in the sixteenth century. If forty was thought to mark the beginning of old age, then to live until one's seventieth, eightieth or even ninetieth year must have been considered remarkable. It is noteworthy in this context that, in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Venice, three consecutive generations of artists were unusually long-lived: Giovanni Bellini (1430–1516) lived to be 86, Titian 89, and Tintoretto 76.

The focus of this paper is on elderly Venetian artists in part because of this and also for the reason that old age appeared to be particularly venerated, certainly amongst the patrician classes, in Venice in this period. This is apparent from the normally advanced years of the political head of state, the Doge. Between 1400 and 1600 the average age of the Doge at election was 72.¹⁰ In view of this, Robert Finlay describes the Venetian Republic as a gerontocracy. He further suggests that, because the Republic was governed by old men, there are related images in Venetian civic iconography. Finlay notes the contrast between the Palazzo Vecchio

⁶ Gilbert, "When did a Man . . . ?," 13, cites the following from *The Castel of Helthe*: "Adolescency to XXV yeres, hotte and moyst in the whiche time the body groweth / Iuuentute unto xl yeres hotte and drye, wherein the body is in perfyte growthe. / Senectute, unto lx yeres, colde and drie, wherein the bodye beginneth to decreace / Age decrepite, until the last time of lyfe, accidently moist, but naturally cold and dry, / Wherein the powers and strength of the body be more and more minished."

⁷ Anouk Janssen, "The Iconography of Old Age in Rembrandt's Early Work," *Rembrandt's Mother: Myth and Reality*. Exhibition Catalogue, ed. Christiaan Vogelaar, G. Korevaar (Leiden: Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal; Zwolle: Waanders, 2005), 53–66.

⁸ See Harry Peters, "Jupiter and Saturn; Medieval Ideals of Elde", in this volume.

⁹ J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: a Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

¹⁰ Robert Finlay, "The Venetian Republic as a Gerontocracy: Age and Politics in the Renaissance," *The Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 8 (1978): 157–78.

in Florence, outside of which Michaelangelo's statue of David stands, and the Doge's Palace in Venice, where a carving showing *The Judgment of Solomon* features amongst the statuary on the façade. Whereas David is young, Solomon is old. This suggests that, amongst other things, the Venetians respected wisdom in their statesmen. This is substantiated by the fact that their primary political figure almost always assumed office at an advanced age. That the Doge was traditionally an old man would partially account for the fact that three generations of its elderly artists continued to be admired in old age. Furthermore, it might also explain why Titian, in particular, became regarded as a venerable old artist.¹¹

Titian clearly lived in a time and environment where attitudes toward the elderly of a certain social standing was benign. Nevertheless, it is also likely that this was enhanced by the artist's own self-fashioning.¹² Titian painted no less than four self-portraits in the last two decades of his life. Curiously, Titian's master and older contemporary, Giovanni Bellini painted none. A cultural explanation for this may have been that Bellini was balanced on a cusp between two traditions. One viewed painting as manual labor and artists as craftsmen, and another regarded painting as primarily an occupation requiring the intellect aided by manual dexterity, thus elevating it to the status of a liberal art.¹³

The Status of the Artist and the Impact of Old Age on the Status of Artists

In response to what Erin Campbell describes as Vasari's "critical ambivalence" toward the elderly Titian, a corpus of art-theoretical literature emerged. This offered strategies by which an artist could avoid revealing any deterioration in his work as a consequence of the physiological changes associated with aging.¹⁴ This was important because the sixteenth century marked the approximate time when a transformation in the status of the artist was beginning to take place.¹⁵

¹¹ In an unfootnoted account, Thomas Dormand mentions that, in his eighth and ninth decade, Titian was called upon by every important state visitor to Venice including Henri III of France. Thomas Dormand, *Old Masters Great Artists in Old Age* (London and New York: Hambledon and London, 2000), 212.

¹² Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* (1980; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

¹³ Andrew Martindale, *The Rise of the Artist in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1972).

¹⁴ Erin Campbell, "The Art of Aging Gracefully: The Elderly Artist as Courtier in Early Modern Art Theory and Criticism," *Sixteenth Century Journal* XXXIII.2 (2002): 321–31.

¹⁵ See *The Changing Status of the Artist*, ed. Emma Barker, Nick Webb, and Kim Woods (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

According to Joanna Woods-Marsden, professional occupation was one of the most important determinants of social rank. The prestige of an individual's occupation was evaluated on the basis of its proximity to or distance from physical labour.¹⁶ Emma Barker describes how traditionally there was little distinction between 'artists,' by which I mean painters, sculptors and architects and craftsmen. At this time, artists were aligned with the mechanical arts, that is, engaging in work that involved manual labor, as opposed to the liberal arts: arithmetic, music, geometry, astronomy, grammar, logic and rhetoric which were associated with the intellect.¹⁷ Woods-Marsden describes how Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo in particular sought to re-classify art as one of the liberal arts by emphasizing the role of the intellect in artistic production.¹⁸ Although the transformation of the position of artists did not occur in any single or linear development, a number of things crystallized in the sixteenth century to enhance artists' status.

First, a group of particularly successful artists emerged contemporaneously, Gentile Bellini (1429–1507) and Giovanni Bellini (1430–1516), Raffaello Sanzio (Raphael) (1483–1520), Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), and Titian. All of these attained an unprecedented level of wealth, fame and, in some cases, ennoblement.¹⁹ Second, the first official academy, the Florentine *Accademia del Disegno*, was founded in 1563 with Michelangelo and Duke Cosimo de' Medici as honorary presidents. The appearance of this quasi-academic institution elevated the role of the artist from a craftsman into a scholar. Third, Vasari's *Lives*, first published in 1550 and again in a substantially expanded edition in 1568, underlined the contribution made by individual artists to a notional progress of art.

The question of what occupations the artist might pursue in old age arose in Vasari's *Lives*. In his biography of Michelangelo, Vasari describes the artist's two final paintings, a *Conversion of Saint Paul* and the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter*, made for the Pauline chapel. Here it becomes apparent that the physically demanding work of painting and creating fresco was not considered an appropriate pursuit for the elderly artist: "Queste furono l'ultime pitture condotte da lui d'età d'anni settantacinque, e, secondo che egli mi diceva, con molta sua gran fatica; avvenga ch'è la pittura, passato una certa età, e massimamente il lavorare in fresco, non è arte da vecchi" ("These scenes, which he painted at the age of seventy-five, were

¹⁶ Joanna Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-Portraiture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ Barker, "Changing Status of Artist," 14.

¹⁸ Woods-Marsden, "Renaissance Self-Portraiture," 4.

¹⁹ Gentile Bellini was ennobled by the Emperor Frederick III, Giovanni Bellini became first painter to the Venetian Republic and was succeeded by Titian who was also knighted by Emperor Charles V., *The Oxford Companion to Art*, ed. Harold Osborne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 125 and 1140–41.

the last pictures he did; and they cost him a great deal of effort, because painting, especially in fresco, is no work for men who have passed a certain age").²⁰ Instead, Michelangelo turned to the practice of a long-established liberal art in his old age. He wrote poetry.²¹

Although this was not a new pursuit for the artist, who had written verse throughout his life, the elderly Michaelangelo composed sonnets. In his letters of 1554 and 1555 addressed to Vasari, Michelangelo enclosed examples of his poetry and he joked that Vasari would warn him against writing because he was old.

Dio il voglia, Vasari, che io la tenga a disagio qualche anno; e so che mi direte bene che io sia vecchio e pazzo a voler fare sonetti, ma perchè molti dicono che io sono rimbambito ho voluto fare l'ufficio mio.

[God wishes it, Vasari, that I should continue to live in misery for some years. I know that you will tell me that I am a foolish old man to want to write sonnets, but since there are many who say that I am in my second childhood I have wanted to act accordingly].²²

The question remains: what was deemed a dignified pastime for the aging artist according to art theoreticians of the time? Campbell observes that sixteenth-century writings on art emphasized the enduring power of rational judgment in the elderly artist and that theoretical study was recommended as a way of transcending the effects of aging.²³ One might also turn to the examples of courtesy literature, such as Baldassare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, 1528 (*The Book of the Courtier*) to find models of behavior leading to a dignified identity for the elderly artist.²⁴ Amongst the literature that followed the second edition of Vasari's *Lives* was Raffaello Borghini's *Il Riposo* (1584), so named because it embraced the form of a fictitious dialogue taking place over four days at an actual country estate called *Il Riposo* outside Florence.²⁵ It comprises four books. The first book discusses iconography, the second style and technique, the third and fourth Italian artists. The most interesting comment on old age can be found in a section of the second book, which describes a tour of the chapel of San Lorenzo in Florence, and considers the work therein of Jacopo da Pontormo (1494–1556). The decline in quality of invention, perspective, and composition in Pontormo's late work gives rise to a brief discussion about what artists should do as they age. One suggestion

²⁰ Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite*, 216; trans. George Bull, 384.

²¹ Michelangelo Buonarroti, *The Poetry of Michelangelo*, an annotated translation James M. Saslow (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991).

²² Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite*; trans. George Bull, 406.

²³ Campbell, "Art of Ageing Gracefully," 321.

²⁴ Campbell, "Art of Ageing Gracefully," 321.

²⁵ Lloyd H. Ellis, "Raffaello Borghini's *Il Riposo*: A Critical Study and Annotated Translation," Ph.D., Cape Western Reserve University, August 2002.

that emerges from Pontormo's biography is that the elderly artist should teach: "Dal che si può giudicare che quando gli huomini vogliono strafare fanno peggio e che le persone quando cominciano a esser d'età vagliano più nel dar consiglio, che nell'operare"²⁶ ("One can judge from this that when men want to overreach they do worse and that people when they begin to age do better in giving advice than putting it into practice").²⁷ Another recommendation that Borghini makes is that artists turn their skills to *disegno* or drawing:

La scultura, e la pittura, ripose il Sirigatto, son arti difficilissime, che ricercano guidicio fermo, vedere acuto, e mano pratica, e salda, le quai tutte cose il tempo indebolisce, e consuma. Perciò dovrebbe ogni scultore, e pittore, che in gioventù ha studiato, e nell'età virile ha co[n] laude operato, nella vecchiezza ritirarsi dal fare opera pubbliche, e volger l'animo a disegni celesti, e lasciare i terreni, conciosiacosa che tutte l'attioni humane salgano infinò a un certo segno, al quale essendo l'huomo arrivato, quasi come alla cima d'un monte, gli conviene, volendo più avanti passare, scendere in basso. Perciò si veggono molte opera di valendhuomini fatte quando l'età cominciava à mancare, molto di gratia, e di bellezza differenti dall'altre prime fatte da loro."²⁸

[Sculpture and painting, Sirigatti responded, are very difficult arts which require steady judgment in order to observe carefully and a practiced and firm hand. Time weakens and consumes all these things. Therefore, every sculptor and painter, who studied in youth and worked in maturity with praise, should retire from doing public work in old age and leave the world and turn his mind to heavenly design, noting that all human activity finally climbs up to a certain level at which it is usual for men, having arrived almost as at the top of a mountain, wanting to pass further forward, to descend downward. Therefore many works are seen by capable men, done when age begins to fail them, much different in grace and beauty from the things that they first did].²⁹

Arguably, there are both spiritual and art-theoretical interpretations of Borghini's notion of "heavenly design." First, is the idea that the elderly artist's intellectual energies should turn toward God—his heavenly designer. And, in terms of art theory, it should be noted here that, in the sixteenth century, *disegno* was more than drawing precisely because it drew attention to the artist's intellectual abilities as well as his creative and manual skills.³⁰ Furthermore, *disegno* was described by

²⁶ Raffaello Borghini, *Il Riposo di Raffaello Borghini In Cui della Pittur[a], e della scultura si fa uella de' più illustri Pitturi, e Scultori, e delle più famose oper[e] loro si fa mentione; e le cos[e] principale appartenenti à dette arte s'insegnano*, (Florence: Gio[r]gio Mareschotti, 1584), 485.

²⁷ Ellis, "Raffaello Borghini's 'Il Riposo,'" 668.

²⁸ Borghini, *Il Riposo*, 196.

²⁹ Borghini, *Il Riposo*, 402.

³⁰ The following definition of *disegno* can be found in a chapter on 'Vasari' in Eric Fernie's *Art History and its Methods* (London: Phaidon, 1999), 39: "Design is the imitation of the most beautiful things in nature, used for the creation of all figures whether in sculpture or painting; and this quality depends on the ability of the artist's hand and mind to reproduce what he sees with his eyes accurately or

a source close to Michaelangelo as the fount and body of painting, sculpture and architecture.³¹ Essentially what emerges from this debate is a route by which the artist could continue to practice in old age without jeopardizing social and intellectual status. Even so, another alternative which the sixteenth-century theorists failed to recommend is self-portraiture—a genre that emerged in the fifteenth century and was developed throughout the sixteenth century. The self-representation of the artist became a strategy by which the artist could augment status and also another way in which, as we can see from Titian's paintings, that one could represent oneself with dignity in old age.³²

A Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man

Titian painted many self-portraits throughout his life, including three in old age. He made one in his early sixties and two in his early seventies. In addition he worked on an ex-voto *Pietà* which was intended for a tomb for himself and his family at the altar of the crucifix in the church of the Frari in Venice.³³ However, it should also be noted that, contrary to Vasari's advice, Titian was additionally engaged in the execution of numerous public commissions in the latter part of his life.³⁴

There is some disagreement over Titian's date of birth, which varies by up to thirteen years.³⁵ Certainly the artist himself was obviously proud of his considerable age. He wrote to Philip II in 1571 stating that he was more than ninety-five.³⁶ It is highly likely that the artist exaggerated his own age to make

correctly onto paper . . . or whatever surface he may be using. The same applies to works of relief in sculpture. And then the artist achieves the highest perfection of style by copying the most beautiful things in nature and by combining the most perfect members."

³¹ Sir Charles Holroyd, *Michel Angelo Buonarroti. With Translations of the Life of the Master by His Scholar Ascanio Condivi and Three Dialogues from the Portuguese by Francisco d'Ollanda*, 2nd edition (1903; London: Duckworth, 1911), 275.

³² Woods-Marsden, "Renaissance Self-Portraiture," 159–69.

³³ The painting can now be seen at the *Accademia* in Venice.

³⁴ See also Zbynek Smetana, "Thematic Reflections on Old Age in Titian's Late Works," *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe: Cultural Representations*, ed. Erin Campbell (Aldershot, England, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 117–35.

³⁵ Estimates of Titian's date of birth have varied between 1477, based on the biography of Raffaello Borghini, and 1490 based on Titian's friend Lodovico Dolce. Charles Hope (London: Jupiter Books, 1980).

³⁶ Frank J. Mather, "When was Titian Born?," *Art Bulletin* XX (1938): 13–25; here 22, note 11: "Titian wrote to Philip II, August 1, 1571, that he himself was in his 'at years' (ultima eta)—and ninety-five years old." See also the additional bibliographical references concerning this question in Smetana, "Thematic Reflections on Old Age in Titian's Late Works," 117, note 1.

himself more venerable. In the light of the art-theoretical debates on the elderly artist, which recommend a withdrawal from painting, it is interesting to examine how Titian constructed his own identity in later life.

Following the death of Giovanni Bellini, Titian became First Painter to the Most Serene Republic of Venice. On the back of this he became renowned throughout Europe from 1530 onwards when he worked increasingly for aristocratic patrons outside Venice.³⁷ Apart from Gentile Bellini, Titian was one of the earliest artists to be awarded noble status by a monarch. He was appointed Count Palatine by Charles V in 1533 who later elevated the artist to the rank of Knight of the Golden Spur.³⁸ With the exception of Michelangelo, who was very highly thought of, the esteem in which Titian's work and person were held was exceptional. He proclaims this status in the self-portrait made in the early 1550s.³⁹ It is not known to whom this portrait was addressed—however, in this image, Titian signifies his rank sartorially. He fashions himself as a richly-attired patrician in a coat with heavy fur lapels and a gold brocade shirt. The heavy gold chain, bestowed on the artist when he was awarded the honor of Count Palatine, is very much in evidence. Moreover, Titian averts his eyes from the viewer of the portrait and this avoidance of eye-contact has been compared by Woods-Marsden to the effect of aristocratic distance followed in earlier portraits of princes.⁴⁰ The painting certainly states that, in terms of social status and fame, the artist had 'arrived.' Despite clear signs of aging, the hooded eyes and the long grey beard, Titian's image is strong which is implied in his upright, physical bearing and large hands. He does not represent himself with the attributes of his trade.⁴¹ It has often been observed that Titian presents himself with a distant gaze.⁴² The artist is not looking at something but is in a contemplative pose thereby signifying intellectual as well as physical strength. Thus he represents himself as an intellectual genius as well as the 'grand old painter.' His imperial decoration is placed conspicuously at the center of the portrait, drawing attention to the honors that his conceptual and technical skills merited him.

In the Prado self-portrait, painted toward the end of the 1560s, when the artist was in his eighties, Titian appears even more distant and withdrawn. The portrait was made at a time when, according to contemporary accounts, Titian's age had started to betray him. In a letter dated February 29, 1568 art dealer and patron

³⁷ Charles Hope, "Titian's Life and Times," *Titian*, ed. id., Jennifer Fletcher, Jill Dunkerton, Miguel Falomir, with Catalogue edited by David Jaffé (London: National Gallery Company London, distributed by Yale University Press, 2003), 19.

³⁸ Woods-Marsden, "Renaissance Self-Portraiture," 160.

³⁹ This portrait forms part of the collection at the Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen, Berlin.

⁴⁰ Woods-Marsden, "Renaissance Self-Portraiture," 162.

⁴¹ Woods-Marsden, "Renaissance Self-Portraiture," 162.

⁴² Woods-Marsden, "Renaissance Self-Portraiture," 162.

Niccolò Stoppio wrote to Hans Jacob Fugger that Titian "was virtually blind and all his new works are done by a German assistant."⁴³ In addition to his failing sight, Titian's hand had begun to tremble and according to the Spanish ambassador in Venice, Don Guzman de Silva, his temperament had become mercurial.⁴⁴ Although this portrait is far more restrained than the previous one, the artist's image remains dignified notwithstanding the reports of physical deterioration and a tendency toward irascibility. Here, the palette is dark and the artist is dressed discreetly in black and the gold chain, though apparent, appears to be shorter and is not given the same prominence as in the earlier portrait. A touch of white at the collar draws the gaze to the artist's head, again in profile, avoiding eye-contact, and staring to a distant place. Here it is possible to detect the effects of time on the artist's face which is gaunt and the nose, one part of the body that grows over time whilst other parts diminish, is hawkish. The physical power and intellectual strength that was apparent in the first portrait of the aging artist is no longer in evidence. Even so, at the bottom left corner of the painting the artist's right hand clutches a paintbrush. Woods-Marsden suggests that this portrait refers to an active life.⁴⁵ But could it also be seen as Titian consciously placing himself in a liminal space between life and death? Titian's last known portrait shows the artist still painting yet disappearing further into the background and being overshadowed by future generations.

Titian's third self-portrait in old age, known as the *Allegory of Prudence* shows the artist in profile wearing a red skull-cap. (Fig. 1) This painting has, most famously, been analyzed by Erwin Panofsky, who claims that the central portrait showing the man in his prime is Titian's son Orazio and the youth in profile is Titian's nephew, Marco Vecellio. There is a Latin inscription above the trio of heads in the painting which reads, "Ex Praeterito / Praesens Prudenter Agit / Ni Futurum actionem deturpet" "[Instructed] by the past, the present acts prudently lest the future spoil [its] action".⁴⁶ This implies that the present learns from the past and acts with due regard to the future. Titian's profile represents the past, his son's portrait stands for the present, and his nephew's profile signifies the future. In this painting, Titian has an ashen complexion which is contrasted by the brightness of

⁴³ See Bert Meijer, "Titian and the North," *Renaissance Venice and the North Crosscurrents in the Time of Bellini, Dürer, and Titian*, ed. Bernard Aikema (New York: Bompiani, 1999); Hope, "Titian," 152; Hans Tietze. "Earliest and Latest Works of Great Artists", *Gazette Des Beaux-Arts* 26 (1944): 273–84.

⁴⁴ "Unfortunately he is unsteady and subject to extremes of mood . . . and sometimes he seems surprised at what he himself has just said or falls asleep . . . His temper, usually benign, has also become uncertain, and he can be terrible when roused," Rodolfo Pallucchini, *Tiziano* (Florence: G. C. Sansoni, 1969), 2: 342.

⁴⁵ Woods-Marsden, "Renaissance Self-Portraiture," 167.

⁴⁶ Erwin Panofsky, "Reflections on Time," *Problems in Titian Mostly Iconographic* (London: Phaidon, 1969), 88–108.

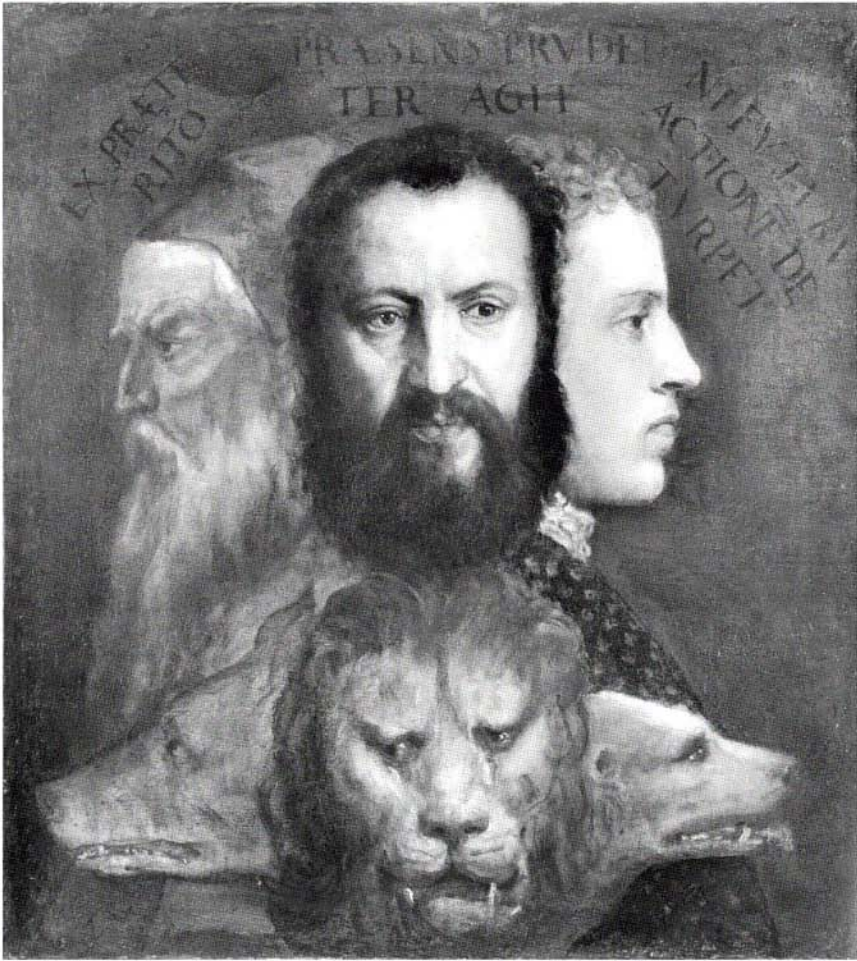


Figure 1 (With the permission of The National Gallery, London)

the skin tones of his son and nephew. Apart from a striking scarlet cap he is wearing, the artist is barely discernible and no longer bears the trappings of his worldly fame. Having provided for his family, Titian is disappearing into the shadows. His mortal identity is fading out.

The painting is divided visually into two parts. The upper or anthropomorphic area shows the human heads. The lower, or zoomorphic, zone shows images of the heads of a wolf, under the head of the old man, a lion below the mature man, and a dog corresponding with the head of the younger man. The animal iconography is explored in depth by Panofsky who suggests it may have derived from the god Serapis, traditionally worshipped in Hellenistic Egypt. An image of the god showed him with a three-headed quadruped at his feet with the heads of a wolf, lion, and dog.⁴⁷ Panofsky explains how descriptions of this creature were disseminated textually over the intervening centuries and interpreted by Macrobius (5th century C.E.) as signifying Time, the lion being the present, the wolf the past, and the dog denoting the future.⁴⁸ The imagery was resurrected by Petrarch who associated it with the Graeco-Roman god Apollo. This coincided with fifteenth-century book illuminations showing Apollo enthroned upon a three-headed animal composed of a lion a wolf and a dog.

An equally probable interpretation of the animal iconography may also reside in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century German and Netherlandish rhyme traditions concerning the ten ages of life.⁴⁹ One such book, the *Liederbuch der Clara Hätzlerin* (the song book of Clara Hätzlerin) published in Augsburg in 1471, describes the ten ages of life with animal analogies and their attributes. In this particular song age 40 was associated with a lion, 60 with a wolf and 80 with a dog. Only the lion has positive attributes, being powerful and noble. The wolf is associated with ill-temper and greed and the dog is devoid of strength.⁵⁰ Visual counterparts to this textual example can be found in contemporary German woodcuts, an example of which can be consulted in the British Museum.⁵¹ Relating this textual and

⁴⁷ Panofsky, "Problems in Titian," 105–06.

⁴⁸ In Hall's *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* both the dog and the wolf are mentioned as part of a three-headed monster symbolising prudence. There is no mention of the lion in this connection, see James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (London: John Murray Ltd., 1992), 105 and 343 respectively.

⁴⁹ I would like to acknowledge Anouk Janssen who has researched the iconography of old age for her PhD thesis for sharing this material with me. Animal iconography is discussed in paragraphs 3.2 and 3.5 in Chapter 1 of the following book: Anouk Janssen, *Grijsaards in zwart-wit: De verbeelding van de ouderdom in de Nederlandse prentkunst (1550–1650)* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2007).

⁵⁰ *Liederbuch der Clara Hätzlerin*, ed. Carl Haltaus. Mit einem Nachwort von Hanns Fischer. Deutsche Neudrucke. Reihe: Texte des Mittelalters (1840; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1966), LXIX. See also Albrecht Classen, *Deutsche Liederbücher des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts. Volksliedstudien*, 1 (Münster, New York, et al.: Waxmann, 2001), III, 30: "O Junger man sich an mich" (180).

⁵¹ Anonymous, *Ten ages of man and animals*, 1482, woodcut. British Museum London, 1872-6-8-351.

iconographic tradition to Titian's *Allegory of Prudence* would certainly resonate strongly. Yet, according to this the presence of the dog under the younger man is rather incongruous, even if there are iconographic traditions of dogs being associated with youth elsewhere.⁵² If this painting shows a shift in Titian's representation from a strong and venerable elderly gentleman to a shadow of his former self, in his final portrait the artist is patently concerned with his spiritual welfare.⁵³

By his late eighties Titian must have been aware that he was approaching the end of his life and, like all good Catholics, would have been making preparations for the moment of his death. As Albrecht Classen observes in his introduction to this volume, the ideal was to die a "good death," surrounded by one's family having put one's affairs, secular and spiritual, in order. There were also ways of preparing for death peculiar to artists and, more generally in the realm of the visual. In his late *Pietà* the elderly Titian was using the very act of painting to prepare for a good death. In a powerfully dramatic composition, the painting shows the body of Jesus, bathed in an unearthly light, being cradled by his mother who sits in a stone niche below a mosaic depicting a pelican which, according to legend, feeds its young with the blood from its own breast.⁵⁴ Titian places himself in the foreground as a barely-clothed ascetic, contemplating the broken body of Christ and touching His wounds. The notion of preparing for a 'good death' would most certainly have been understood by Titian and his contemporaries and the fashioning of a pious self-image would have been of utmost concern to the elderly artist. Here, by meditating upon the suffering of Jesus, it is most likely that Titian is demonstrating his piety in the hope that he will be redeemed. In the words of Borghini, he is turning his mind to 'heavenly design.' The practice of elderly artists showing themselves in the *Pietà* context was not unprecedented, for example the tomb of Baccio Bandinelli (1488–1559) in Santissima Annunciata in Florence shows the sculptor holding the dead Christ. Titian's late working is nevertheless striking in that it appears to have been the source of spiritual inspiration for other elderly Venetian artists including his younger contemporary Tintoretto.⁵⁵

⁵² There is an engraving in the Rijksprentenkabinet Amsterdam, showing the six ages of life by Crispijn de Passe where the second age (adolescentia) is associated with a dog, which fits in the iconography of youth and hunting. However this was published in 1599 post-dating Titian but it may have been grounded in earlier traditions.

⁵³ See also Smetana, "Thematic Reflections on Old Age in Titian's Late Works," 125–26.

⁵⁴ "The motif of the pelican piercing its breast to feed its young with its blood became the symbol of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross." Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols*, 238.

⁵⁵ I have explored this concept in part of my PhD thesis, "Death in Venice in *The Pictorial Wit of Domenico Tiepolo*, which I hope to complete in Spring 2007.

Tintoretto's last painting, an *Entombment of Christ* (1592), was painted for the mortuary chapel of the Benedictine monks at S. Giorgio Maggiore. It is a typically dark composition, showing the body of Christ being taken from the cross.⁵⁶ A portrait of the aging, bearded, Tintoretto seems to appear twice, as Joseph of Arimathea, both at the shoulders of Christ's and again at his feet. The composition is spiritually comparable to Titian's *Pietà* insofar as it is a pious contemplation of Christ's body by the painter as he approached death. An interesting contrast can be seen in the way that the artists portray themselves, Titian as a scantily clothed old man, and Tintoretto as the finely-dressed rich man. Interestingly, this contrasts with one of the anecdotes in Carlo Ridolfi's biographies of the artists. Whereas Titian appears proud of the external trappings of his wealth and fame in his self-portraits, Tintoretto was sartorially indifferent. In Ridolfi's biography Tintoretto showed little regard for his right to wear the *cittadini's* toga, and it would satisfy his sense of humor to wear it in a deliberately careless manner.⁵⁷ Therefore, it displays a curious reversal of character that, in this instance, Titian should construct himself in such an unworldly light, whereas Tintoretto should chose to appear as the sumptuously-robed Arimathea. Titian may have considered it to be an act of profound humility to portray himself virtually naked in front of Christ's body. It may also have been a matter of decorum: Titian's image was a personal painting for his own tomb whereas Tintoretto's altarpiece was a public commission for a Benedictine order.

* * *

This essay has attempted to identify strategies adopted by Renaissance artists practicing in old age in response to both conceptual tools recommended in art-theoretical treatises and critical observations made about elderly artists in sixteenth-century biographies. It would appear that the primary intention was to preserve the hard-won status of the artist. Under no circumstance should this status be compromised by aging artists continuing to work on public commissions at the risk of drawing attention to the manual nature of their craft with inferior workmanship.

To deal with this, Titian fashioned a dignified identity for himself in his late portraits which enabled him to demonstrate the status and the honor conferred on

⁵⁶ Tintoretto has been identified on two occasions. First, by John Pope-Hennessy *The Portrait in the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon, 1966), 295–96, and subsequently by Peter Humfrey in *Painting in Renaissance Venice* (1995; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 239. It is my own hypothesis that Tintoretto represents himself twice in this painting.

⁵⁷ Carlo Ridolfi, *Le maraviglie dell'arte ovvero, Le vite degli illustri pittori veneti e dello stato /descritte da Carlo Ridolfi*, [ed.] Detlev Freiherrn von Hadeln (Rome: Società Multigrafica Editrice Somu, 1965).

him through his noble dress and a distant demeanor.⁵⁸ Although discreetly present in the second portrait, attributes that draw attention to the manual aspects of artistic production are played down and the artist's distracted gaze, avoiding all eye contact, can be interpreted as haughtily aristocratic or intellectually preoccupied. In his final artistic endeavor the frail and elderly Titian seeks spiritual status, kneeling before the dead body of Christ. The appearance of Titian's portraits contemporaneous to an emerging dialectic as to what should preoccupy the artist in his dotage does not seem coincidental. It is as though the elderly artist himself is offering a painterly intellectual and spiritual model to be emulated by future generations of aging artists.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Smetana, "Thematic Reflections on Old Age in Titian's Late Works," 132–34, argues that Titian attempted to create a legacy with his *Pietà* and his *Flaying of Marsyas*, but she does not convincingly address why here Titian reflected on his old age.

⁵⁹ A similar topic was discussed by Josef Ehmer in his paper "Alter und Arbeit bei der 'Kreativen Elite' der Renaissance" at the previously mentioned symposium at Donau-Universität, Krems an der Donau, 16–18 October 2006. Ehmer's article will be published in *Alterskulturen des Mettalters und der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Elisabeth Vavra

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The Sulzbach Jubilee: Old Age in Early Modern Europe and America

On July 20, 1695, the day of his seventy-fifth birthday, Prince Christian August of Sulzbach¹ celebrated the fiftieth year of his reign at an elaborate feast to which he invited the two hundred and sixty inhabitants of Sulzbach who had reached the age of seventy. The celebration began with a Church service, after which the guests gathered in the castle square. There a "corn fed ox with gilded horns and a cow with silver horns were led in, and the men threw dice for the first and the women for the latter on two prepared tables." After the prizes were awarded, the elderly guests marched into the town hall, where long tables had been set up, the ones on the left for the men, those on the right for the women. Every table was generously provided with food and drink, and, as the townspeople stood by and watched the joyful celebration, the Prince "went from table to table, speaking with the guests, whose hearts, unlocked by wine and joy, were revealed in their expressions, gestures, and words." Each guest was "allowed to take his dish and utensils home with him as a memento, and the guests at each table cast lots for the tablecloth."²

¹ Sulzbach (now known as Sulzbach-Rosenberg) was part of a small principality in the Upper Palatinate. It is 10 km northwest of Amberg and 50 km east of Nuremberg. For an account of Christian August's life and policies as a ruler, see Volker Wappmann, *Durchbruch zur Toleranz: Die Religionspolitik des Pfalzgrafen Christian August von Sulzbach, 1622-1708* (Neustadt a. d. Aisch: Verlag Degener & Co, 1995).

² *Der Beherrscher der Stadt Sulzbach durch achthundert Jahre, vorgestellt an dem Jubeltage des durchlauchtigsten Kurfürsten von Pfalz und Baiern Karl Philipp Theodors funfzig Jahre regierenden Herogens von Sulzbach* (n.p., 1783), 59-62: „Ein gemästeter Ochs mit vergoldeten, und eine Kuh mit versilberten Hörnern, wurden nachgeführt, um jenen mußten die Männer, um diese aber die Weiber auf den zween zubereiteten Tischen öffentlich mit Würfeln spielen. Die fürstlichen Herrschaften sahen dem Spiele von den Fenstern zu, und der Gewinn wurde nach dem glücklichsten Loos den Gewinnenden übergeben. Die Versammelten zogen in der Ordnung, wie sie in den Schloßgegangenen waren, theils nach dem Rathhaus, theils aber wieder in das Bauhaus zurück. Auf dem Rathhaus wurde der Erker, gegen den Markt, für die hochfürstliche Tafel zugerichtet; an derselben sassen auf einem Antritt erhaben, Christian August, sein Prinz Theodor und dessen Frau Gemahlin, ausser welchen zween höchsten Personen, alle übrige hohe und niedere Gäste, nicht weniger also siebenzig Jahre zählten. Die bestimmten Zahl der fürstliche Tafel, an der auch der siebenzigjährige Herr Deschant Silberbauer zu sitzen die Gnade hatte, und aller übrigen Tische, waren zwölf Männer oder Weiber. In einer Entfernung von dem Erker stunden auf jeder Seite des Rathhauses sechs lange Tafeln; die linke war den Männern, die rechte den Weibern angewiesen. Auch in dem Bauhaus wurden zehn

It is the purpose of this paper to analyze this feast in the context of the historical work that has been done on old age in the early modern period (by which I mean the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries). In his pioneering book *L'homme devant la mort* Phillipe Ariès claims that while old age was ridiculed in the seventeenth century, it was honored in the eighteenth.³ Many scholars agree with Ariès in seeing the eighteenth century as marking a decisive turning point in attitudes towards the elderly. David Troyansky, for example, describes the change in attitude toward the elderly in France during the second half of the eighteenth century: instead of being the brunt of ridicule and neglect, the elderly began to be treated sympathetically and given respect and care.⁴ George Rousseau goes so far as to suggest that the eighteenth century witnessed "a geriatric enlightenment."⁵ But while such a change of attitude may be characteristic of Europe, David Hackett Fischer proposes a different scenario for Colonial America. He disagrees with Ariès and describes the great reverence felt for the elderly throughout the Colonial period and up to the Revolution. At that point he claims a new cult of youth took over and the elderly were marginalized.⁶ Daniel Scott Smith disputes this, claiming that there never was any "Golden Age" for the elderly either in pre- or post-industrial society.⁷ Based on his study of Hingham, Massachusetts, he argues that there was considerable inter-generational conflict over property and material

gleiche Tafeln auf die angezelgte Art bereitet. Alle Tische wurden freigebig mit Speisen und Wein versehen; jedem Gast wurde erlaubt, nach seinem Vergnügen zu essen und zu trinken. Dieses Freudenmahl dauerte, in Gegenwart eines großen Volks, bis acht Uhr Abends, da die fürstliche Herrschaft von der Tafel aufstunde, und von einem Tisch zu dem andern mit den Gästen sprachen, deren Herz, vom Wein und Freude ausgeschossen, in alle ihre Mienen, Gebärden und Worte heraustrott. Eben so ließ sich der Herzog auch in dem Bauhause gegen alle herab, und gieng unter den feurigsten Segenswünschen in das Schloß zurück. Jeder Geladene hatte die Erlaubniß, seinen Tischzeug mit sich zu einem Andenken zu nehmen, und die Gäste eines jeden Tisches warfen um die Tafeltucher das Loos" (60-61).

³ Phillipe Ariès, *L'Homme devant la mort* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977). Cf. Richard Freedman, "Sufficiently Decayed: Gerontophobia in English Literature," in *Aging and the Elderly: Humanistic Perspectives in Gerontology*, ed. Stuart F. Spicker, Kathleen M. Woodward, and David D. van Tassel (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), 49-62.

⁴ David Troyansky, *Old Age in the Old Regime: Image and Experience in Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 6.

⁵ George Rousseau, "Towards a Geriatric Enlightenment," in *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Kevin L. Cope (New York: AMC Press, 2001), 6: 3-44.

⁶ David Hackett Fischer, *Growing Old in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

⁷ Daniel Scott Smith, "Old Age and the 'Great Transformation': A New England Case Study," *Aging and the Elderly*, 285-302; here 296: "My reading of the evidence for this Christian, communal, patriarchal, English, pre-industrial society certainly does not support any notion of a 'Golden Age' for old people. Being a Christian culture, early New England held the signal attribute of old age to be nearness to death. Being communal, it granted able performance and the good of the group precedence over respect due age. Being patriarchal, it witnessed fathers both crushing and arousing hostility in their sons before being obliged to help them get started in life. Being English, it required autonomy to pass in considerable degree to newly married sons who headed their households. And being pre-industrial, it did not possess enough resources to satisfy all and thus economic conflict inhered in such an environment of scarcity. During most of the eighteenth century scarcity increased and the older matrix of values sustaining respect for old age withered."

goods and that the very fact that society was patriarchal exacerbated this conflict.⁸ Coming to a very different conclusion in regard to England, Steven R. Smith argues that although the seventeenth century witnessed profound social, political, and economic changes, patriarchy remained in tact and consequently respect for the elderly continued to be a cultural ideal, even if it was not always practiced.⁹ And it was not always practiced precisely because members of the younger generation often resented their parents for withholding the resources needed to establish a family and independent adult identity. According to mercantilist presuppositions, one person's gain is another's loss, a truism that led John Locke to imagine sons saying, "When will you die, Father?"¹⁰ Such a sentiment was summed up in the French rubric for a father who held on to land too long: "père qui vit trop."¹¹

If we consider the Sulzbach Jubilee and the great attention and care taken for the elderly citizens of Sulzbach at that event, we can see that the kind of reverence for old people described by Fischer existed in seventeenth-century Europe as well as America. I would go farther and argue along with Albrecht Classen and many of the contributors to this volume that reverence for old age existed in every recorded period of history, but so did disdain, contempt, jealousy, and even hatred. From earliest times until today, the elderly have been viewed and treated with ambivalence. In traditional and prehistoric societies, there was great respect for old age, for only the elders could transmit traditional knowledge. But once an old person became senile and could no longer serve as a meaningful bridge between generations, s/he was killed or left to die. In the ancient, medieval, and early modern world, old age was respected for its maturity and wisdom, and the elderly were routinely appointed to positions of power as Popes (Greek for father), presbyters (Greek for elders), aldermen (Middle English for old), and feudal

⁸ Writing about Hingham, Massachusetts, Smith says: "My reading of the evidence for this Christian, communal, patriarchal, English, pre-industrial society certainly does not support any notion of a "Golden Age" for old people. Being a Christian culture, early New England held the signal attribute of old age to be nearness to death. Being communal, it granted able performance and the good of the group precedence over respect due age. Being patriarchal, it witnessed fathers both crushing and arousing hostility in their sons before being obliged to help them get started in life. Being English, it required autonomy to pass in considerable degree to newly married sons who headed their households. And being pre-industrial, it did not possess enough resources to satisfy all and thus economic conflict inhered in such an environment of scarcity. During most of the eighteenth century scarcity increased, and the older matrix of values sustaining respect for the aged withered" ("Old Age and the 'Great Transformation': A New England Case Study," 296).

⁹ Steven R. Smith, "Death, Dying and the Elderly in Seventeenth-Century England," *Aging and the Elderly*, 205-220.

¹⁰ John Locke, "Some Thoughts Concerning Education," *Works* (1823; Darmstadt, Germany: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1963), IX, 34.

¹¹ Fischer, *Growing Old in America*, 69. Shulamith Shahar discusses the ambivalent and even hostile treatment of parents by their children in the Middle Ages in *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: 'Winter clothes us in shadow and pain'*, trans. Yael Lotan (1995; London: Routledge, 1997); eadem, "The Middle Ages and Renaissance," *The Long History of Old Age*, ed. Pat Thane (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 71-111.

seigneurs (Old French for seniority). But along with this reverence for elderly officeholders, went derision, disgust, and downright loathing for old men and women who failed to perform their allotted roles and act as they were supposed to.¹²

The upshot of all this seems to confirm the idea that old people were viewed with ambiguity in the early modern period just as they were in preceding and subsequent periods.¹³ But the one factor that has been left out of these various discussions of old age is science. Beginning in the seventeenth century old age ceased to be thought of primarily as a personal or religious problem and became far more of a medical issue. In my opinion this marked a major change in attitude, not necessarily toward old people per se but toward old age itself. As I will argue, the idea that the infirmities and discomforts of old age could be ameliorated and even reversed as a result of medical intervention reflected the growing optimism and belief in progress generated by the Scientific Revolution. Old age was no longer seen primarily as a jumping off point to the afterlife but as a stage of life in its own right that could be a time of fulfillment and enjoyment.

One might object and claim that the desire for eternal life and a medical approach to prolonging life have been constants in human history, reflected in the work of those doctors, philosophers, alchemists, and adventurers who searched for the fountain of youth and that special elixir capable of putting the bloom back in withered checks and restoring old flesh to supple youthfulness. The examples of the Patriarchs and the Hyperboreans spurred on the experiments of alchemists in every period, who drew on the medical theories of Hippocrates and Galen to concoct the perfect formula for balancing the four humors, cooling off innate heat, or restoring moisture to desiccated bodies. Ancient myths of rejuvenation circulated throughout the medieval period stimulating Roger Bacon (ca. 1214-1294) to write *The Cure of Old Age and the Preservation of Youth* and Arnold of Villanova (ca. 1235-1313) to claim that a concoction of saffron, aloes, and viper juice, together with cheerfulness, moderation, and the avoidance of sex and strenuous exercise, would allow one to live to a ripe old age. Marsilio Ficino's (1433-1499) recipe for rejuvenation was more direct and involved the relatively simple procedure of "sucking blood out of the arm of a young man." Other suggestions included being

¹² As Gretchen Mieskowski and Karen Pratt have shown in their respective essays in this volume, old women who were either sexually active themselves or panderers for sexually active young women were considered particularly abhorrent by males and male authors. See also Connie Scarborough's essay in this volume.

¹³ The ambiguous attitude towards the elderly in the early modern period is stressed by Pat Thane in *Old Age in English History: Past Experiences, Present Issues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), where he traces this ambivalence back to ancient sources. For further examples of this ambiguity, see *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe: Cultural Representations*, ed. Erin Campbell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) and *The Long History of Old Age*, ed. Pat Thane (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005). Anouck Janssen's essay in this volume discusses the depictions of "good" and "bad" old people in Netherlandish prints (ca. 1550-1650).

nursed by young virgins or, better still, sleeping with them.¹⁴ Paracelsus wrote his *Liber de Longa Vita* (1526), and Luigi Cornaro penned *A Treatise of Health and Long Life with the Sure Means of Attaining It* (1562). In a book denouncing popular errors, Lauren Joubert denied that eating testicles could rejuvenate the aged, which suggests that this particular remedy had been tried.¹⁵ But while these examples—and many others exist as well—show that certain doctors and many alchemists from ancient times up to the sixteenth century considered old age a disease that could be “cured,” this was a minority view before the seventeenth century.¹⁶ The sad truth was that for all their claims to possess miraculous medicines, nostrums, charms, or prayers to prolong life alchemists, physicians, surgeons, barbers, cunning folk, mountebanks, priests, soothsayers, and whomever else the elderly might consult were unable to come up with the goods. As Erasmus wrote, “Terrima porro / Senecta, morbus ingens, nullis arcerive potest pellive medelis (“but the ugly old age, a dreadful illness, cannot be stopped nor cured by any remedy”).¹⁷ Because medicine proved so ineffective, a general fatalism prevailed, and this produced a massive religious literature of resignation and advice about the ways to prepare for a good death. For the vast majority of people, the quest for eternal life was ruled out on the grounds that it violated the natural and divine order, that it was incompatible with the inherent defects in human nature caused by original sin, and, finally, from a Christian perspective, that eternal life on earth was simply undesirable inasmuch as heaven was the true destination of every human being.¹⁸

Before the seventeenth century—and even after it since old ideas die slowly—old age was considered a time of transition between this world and the next. It was a period for reflection when one was expected to put one’s spiritual house in order and wait patiently for the end.¹⁹ Long life could be a sign of divine favor, but it was not always so. As Cotton Mather put it: “They who walk in the way of righteousness shall be honoured with living to old age, when the wicked shall have their days shortened, which indeed many times happen to be so, yet not always.”²⁰ There was little human beings could do to prolong their lives because sin had corrupted men to the point that they were powerless to alter whatever fate God had ordained. The very attempt to increase one’s life span was considered

¹⁴ These and many other ideas are discussed in Gerald J. Gruman, “A History of Ideas about the Prolongation of Life: The Evolution of the Prolongevity Hypothesis to 1800,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, ns. 56, pt. 9 (1966).

¹⁵ Lauren Joubert, *Erreurs populaires au fait de la médecine et régime de santé* (Bordeaux, 1578), 26.

¹⁶ In his article “Medical Representation of Old Age in the Renaissance: the Influence of Non-Medical Texts,” Daniel Schäfer sets out “to demonstrate that the medical contribution to descriptions of old age was surprisingly limited, at least in contrast to modern times.” Old age “was not even a relevant topic for sixteenth-century medicine. There simply was no adequate ancient model to provide a basis for elaboration” (*Growing Old in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Erin Campbell, 11, 12).

¹⁷ Desiderius Erasmus, *Carmene alpestre*. Cited in *ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸ Classen, introduction to this volume, 10 and 36.

¹⁹ See Scott Taylor’s essay in this volume.

²⁰ Increase Mather, *The Dignity and Duty of Aged Servants*, 50.

impious since Christian piety recommended that one long for and welcome death.²¹ Meditation on death (*memento mori*) was recommended, and it was even suggested that death required practice. François Nepveu advised old people to single out the last day of every month for special prayers, acts of repentance, and meditation. They were to go to bed as if entering their coffin or tomb.²² In his book *Death and the Enlightenment*, John McManners describes the practice of magistrates in certain French towns of hiring men to patrol the empty streets at night, dressed in special black clothes with a white cross on the front and back or a tabard with a skull and cross-bones. Their job was to cry out at intervals, “Priez pour les trépassés” and “Pensez à la mort.”²³ Individuals who ignored such strictures and clung to life were targets of ridicule and abuse. One has only to think of the rowdy charivaris that greeted widows and widowers attempting to remarry. Cotton Mather deplored the fact that “Old folks seem to grasp the hardest for the world, when they are just going out of it: An *Evil Disease*!”²⁴ Pierre Lallement, the Rector and Chancellor of the University of Paris considered the elderly and infirm “monsters,” who should die willingly:

What advantage will we find in living longer? Do not old age and the infirmities that accompany it render us insupportable for others and for ourselves? Consider an old man overburdened with years, his spirit dejected, his body exhausted, his face lined with wrinkles, his eyes half closed, his voice trembling, his head bent towards the earth as if seeking a sepulcher in which to throw himself: is not this a kind of monster in Nature?²⁵

Especially monstrous were old men and women who dyed their hair, wore makeup, and dressed inappropriately in an effort to make themselves appear more youthful. Early modern authors had a vast repertoire of images from the bible and ancient and medieval literature to draw upon when they described the foibles of old age. From Aristophanes to Sheridan, with Chaucer and Boccaccio and a host of others in between, the vices of old age were paraded across the stage and page in the form of avaricious misers who monopolize scarce resources, lecherous but impotent old men, whose young wives cuckold them, bullying, senile patriarchs clinging to the power they should relinquish to their offspring, and the assorted hags witches, and old trots whose libidinous urges disgraced their sex. Vanity, lechery, and avarice were the most commonly ridiculed traits of the aged. The thwarting of young love by the elderly was a standard theme.²⁶ The general

²¹ See Juanita Feros Ruys's essay in this volume.

²² François Nepveu, *La manière de se préparer à la mort pendant la vie* (Paris, 1713).

²³ John McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment: Changing Attitudes to Death among Christians and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 61-2.

²⁴ Cotton Mather, *A Good Old Age: A Brief Essay on the Glory of Aged Piety* (Boston, 1726), 29.

²⁵ Pierre Lallement, *Les Saints Désirs de la Mort, ou Recueil de quelques Pensées des Pères de L'église, pour montrer comment les Chrétiens doivent mépriser la Vie, et souhaiter la Mort* (Brussels, 1713), 38-40, 46-7. Cited in Troyansky, *Old Age*, 86.

²⁶ Richard Freedman, “Sufficiently Decayed: Gerontophobia in English Literature.”

consensus from all this was that old people who behaved in such socially irresponsible ways should simply stop protesting their allotted fate, accept it, and die. But even though this kind of fatalism continued to characterize the attitudes of most people in the eighteenth century, a new mentality began to emerge among what McManners describes as "the affluent minority." As he says, "[T]hey were wanting to live longer, and they were discovering the logic to insist on enjoying life and being useful at a greater age."²⁷

In her highly informative book about medical practice in eighteenth-century Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, Mary Lindemann agrees but argues that it was not only the affluent who actively sought medical help. In this community of predominantly small farmers, there was a great desire for health on the part of everyone. People were not fatalistic, and even though high infant mortality rates were the norm, pediatric ailments were not accepted as routine.²⁸ As she says, when it came to the health of young and old alike, "the inhabitants of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel approximated us more than their two centuries' removal in times might suggest."²⁹ The idea health could be ameliorated and life prolonged through medical intervention became more common in the early modern period because of the growing secularization generated by the bitter debates of the Reformation period and the more positive view of human agency fostered by the scientific revolution. The indiscriminate viciousness of the wars of religion generated skepticism about religion in general as well as skepticism about the reality of life after death, thus enhancing the idea of life on earth.³⁰ A huge transformation was in the making in regard to the way people viewed themselves. Was human nature irredeemably corrupted by original sin, or were human beings born good and corrupted by bad habits and corrupt society?³¹

Ideas of progress were in the air, and instead of looking back to a lost Eden or Golden Age, people began to look forward to a new age of change and innovation when human life would be radically transformed to the point that old people

²⁷ McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment*, 84.

²⁸ Mary Lindemann, *Health & Healing in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 349: "... parents did not face the deaths and illnesses of their children with stoic fortitude. They took great pains to alleviate the miseries of their offspring and consulted healers even for very young children, often those just day old."

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 373.

³⁰ Gruman, "A History of Ideas about the Prolongation of Life." 77. Michel Vovelle documents the growing doubts about eternal life in *Mourir autrefois: attitudes collectives devant la mort aux XIII^e à XVIII^e siècles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974); *idem*, *Piété baroque et déchristianisation en province au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Édition Seuil, 1973). Scholars disagree about whether there was such a thing as the scientific revolution. For a discussion of the various views, see Margaret J. Osler, ed., *Rethinking the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). I agree with those who think the term is still valid. See Margaret Jacob's article in this collection.

³¹ In his *Essay on Human Understanding*, Locke played down the Fall, insisting on the capabilities of the human understanding and the importance of education. The emphasis on original sin that had been such a feature of the Reformation, and especially of Calvinism, began a precipitous decline in the second half of the seventeenth century.

might quite literally be rejuvenated and live forever. As the wisdom of the past lost its hold, new vistas of unimagined possibilities opened up as to what individuals might do if they worked cooperatively to improve their lot. Thus the sciences of geriatrics and gerontology was born, not in the nineteenth century as several scholars have argued, but two centuries earlier.³²

Change, progress, and innovation: this was the message of Bacon's *The Advancement of Learning* (1605) and of Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society* (1667), and it was the view that motivated many of the so-called "virtuosi" who joined the *Royal Society* and sent in reports from all over the British Isles, as well as from points abroad, describing new experiments, inventions, and discoveries to make life better through improvements in agriculture and education, the reform of the medical profession, and the fostering of religious toleration. Jonathan Swift ridiculed these virtuosi in *Gulliver's Travels* with his scathing description of the academicians on the flying island of Laputa fruitlessly trying to reconstitute food from excrement and extract sunbeams for cucumbers. For all its bite, however, Swift's satire, along with the Thomas Shadwell's satirical comedy *The Virtuoso* (1691), provide evidence for the optimism inspired by Francis Bacon's writings and by his admonition that unlike their medieval predecessors natural philosophers had the duty to produce practical "fruit" from their scientific researches as well as intellectual "light."

Bacon was a major figure in promoting the "modern" agenda that things could and would advance and improve, and this included the life span of ordinary individuals. Although he felt the need to bow to the Christian view that death and salvation were the ultimate objectives of human life, he was convinced that while alive individuals should have the means to keep their bodies and minds as healthy and active as possible:

Although to a Christian making for the land of Promise the world is but a wilderness, yet even while we travel in the wilderness to have our shoes and garments (that is our bodies, which are as the clothing of the soul) not worn out by the way, must be accounted a gift of divine grace.³³

In his *New Atlantis*, Bacon lists among the "Magnalia Naturae," or those things men most desire, "the prolongation of life," "the restitution of youth," and "the retardation of age." He describes the scientists employed in "Solomon's House" who produce a "water of Paradise" that is "very sovereign for health, and the

³² Peter N. Stearns sees the medicalization of old age as occurring in the nineteenth century in the circle around Charcot [*Old Age in European Society: The Case of France* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), ch. 3]. Michel Foucault argues that geriatrics emerged in the nineteenth century as well but from a different source, that of the clinical medicine of Xavier Bichat and P.J.G Cabanis, among others [*Birth of the Clinic: an Archaeology of Medical Perception*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973)]. Troyansky places it earlier, at the end of the eighteenth century (*Old Age in the Old Regime*, 109), while I argue that interest in gerontology emerges at the end of the seventeenth century.

³³ Francis Bacon, *The Collected Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert L. Ellis, and Douglas D. Heath (London: Longmans, 1878), 9: 39.

prolongation of life.”³⁴ There were also special caves on the island with air that helped to heal and prolong life and a bath that restored “the very juice and substance” of the human body.”³⁵ Solomon’s house contained laboratories in which animals and birds were dissected “that thereby we may take light what may be wrought upon the body of man.” The fact that headless birds “leape and flutter” suggested that it might be possible to resuscitate the dead. Bacon even proposed that organs could be transplanted. Bacon’s *History of Life and Death* did much to legitimize the idea that life could be prolonged. In this work Bacon discusses the influence of climate, nourishment, and occupation on the length of and individual’s life. In one section he discusses measures against premature aging. Since he believed that vital forces are composed of material spirits, he thought these spirits could be preserved and condensed by coating the body with oil. In another place he described “Age” as “a great but slow dryer,” suggesting that massage could both moisten and soften the body. He also recommends bathing and the ingesting of certain herbs to purge old bodily fluids and replace them with new ones. All these instances show that Bacon viewed old age and death as both natural (i.e. not ordained by God) and avoidable.³⁶ Bacon wrote at a time when innovation was generally looked upon with suspicion and tradition, summed up in the wisdom of the ancients, provided the touchstone for the conservative ideology of the court society to which he belonged. Reverence for the past was, however, in the process of giving way—at least in the minds of some people—to a passionate embrace of the new and innovative.³⁷ Bacon was a pivotal figure in this transition as he carefully weighed ancient traditions against new ideas and came to the conclusion that older and earlier was not always better.³⁸

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 5: 400.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 401.

³⁶ Anne-Julia Zwielerlein, “Medea’s Revenge: Francis Bacon on the Prolongation of Life,” *Old Age and Ageing in British and American Culture and Literature*, ed. Christa Johnsohn. Englishes Seminar der Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, Bonn.16 (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2004), 51-69.

³⁷ As we listen to news reports on the radio and television, we hardly think about what the word “news” really means. The term first came into common usage in the sixteenth century and referred to the astonishing amount of new information flooding into Europe as a result of humanistic scholarship, the voyages of discovery, the conquest of the New World, and the proliferation of printed texts. See Stephen J. Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possession: The Wonder of the New World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Museums, Collecting, and Scientific Culture in Early Modern* (University of California Press, 1994); William Eamon notes how printers profited from advertising their books as “new” in his *Science and the Secrets of Nature: Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 108. Lynn Thorndike comments on the number of seventeenth-century books with *novus* or “unheard-of” in their titles in his article, “Newness and Novelty,” *Roots of Scientific Thought: A Cultural Perspective*, ed. Philip P. Wiener and Aaron Noland (New York: Basic Books, 1957).

³⁸ While Bacon wrote extensively on what he called “the Wisdom of the Ancients,” he also wrote “Of Innovations” and the *Novum Organum*, which by its very title implied that his work superseded Aristotle’s *Organon*. On Bacon’s balancing age between ancient and modern, see Sharon Achinstein, “How To Be a Progressive without Looking like One: History and Knowledge in Bacon’s *New Atlantis*,” *Clio* 17 (1988): 249-64; Hermann Josef Real, “Tradition and Progress in Bacon’s *Advancement*

Thus, although his ideas were admittedly highly derivative, going back to medieval and Renaissance sources, they resonated in subsequent decades in the minds of those who championed the "Moderns" and repudiated the "Ancients."

Like Bacon, Descartes embraced the idea of progress and believed that the prolongation of life was feasible. His optimistic, progressive agenda appears in a letter to Marin Mersenne, the French theologian, philosopher, mathematician, and music theorist, in March of 1636. Here he describes what came to be known as his *Discourse on the Method of rightly conducting one's reason and seeking the truth in the sciences* as one of four treatises to be included under the general title "The Plan of a Universal Science which is capable of raising our nature to its highest degree of perfection."³⁹ Descartes was convinced that "we might free ourselves from innumerable diseases, both of the body and of the mind" and that we might eventually be freed from "the infirmity of old age."⁴⁰ St. Evremond described a visit that Sir Kenelm Digby made to Descartes, in which the prolongation of life was discussed. Digby initiated the subject by suggesting to Descartes that it was more important to try and prolong life than to speculate about abstruse philosophical issues. St. Evremond reported that "M. Des Cartes assured him [Digby], that he had already considered that matter; and that to render a man immortal, was what he would not venture to promise, but that he was very sure it was possible to lengthen out his life to the period of the Patriarchs."⁴¹

Bacon and Descartes were key advocates of the idea that nature could be manipulated and controlled, a guiding principle of the scientific revolution. Their optimism flew in the face of the skeptical conditioning that was part and parcel of a classical education and Christian upbringing, both of which emphasized the inevitable decrepitude and sheer nastiness of old age unless it was accompanied by philosophical resignation or religious cast of mind. The myth of a lost Golden Age and the commonly accepted idea that the Ancients were vastly superior to the Moderns came under increasing attack as trade, travel, developing commerce, and the ingenuity of artisans, craftsmen, and natural philosophers generated visions of hitherto unimagined possibilities and brought new and unprecedented things such as rhinoceri and ant eaters to the attention of Europeans.⁴² Microscopes and

of *Learning Scientia potestas est*—Knowledge is Power: Francis Bacon to Michel Foucault," *Anglia* 119 (2001): 1-19

³⁹ *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugdale Murdoch. 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1: 109.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴¹ *The Works of Monsieur St. Evremond, with the Life of the Author by Des Maizeaux*, ed. and transl. Pierre Des Maizeux. 2nd ed. (London, 1728), 1, xli-xlii.

⁴² Stephen Greenblatt has captured the profound psychological effect the New World had on Old World psyches. In the face of so much novelty, the ancient maxim *Nil admirari* no longer made sense: "in the presence of the New World the classical model of mature, balanced detachment seemed at once inappropriate and impossible. Columbus's voyage initiated a century of intense wonder. . . . European culture experienced something like the "startle reflex" one can observe in infants: eyes widened, arms outstretched, breathing stilled, the whole body momentarily convoluted. But what does it mean to experience wonder? What are its origins, its uses, and its limits? Is it closer to

telescopes may have blown the minds of natural philosophers, allowing them to see things they never knew existed, but air and water pumps, carriages with better springs for faster and more comfortable travel, newly designed houses with smaller, heated rooms, and more sophisticated, healthful, and appetizing food all contributed to the idea that, indeed, life was worth living, even for the elderly.⁴³ In addition to these practical improvements, the magisterial work of Sir Isaac Newton in physics and optics was heralded as irrefutable proof that the Moderns were unquestionably many steps ahead of the Ancients. These developments only affected a small proportion of the population, to be sure, but it was that minority who directed public opinion, and public opinion was definitely tipping toward the view that a good life here and now was as desirable as it was possible.

As we have seen, Bacon thought revitalizing the body's "juices" might be one way to prolong life. After William Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood, this idea was taken up in the many experiments involving blood transfusions. Transfusing young blood into aged veins produced some extraordinary results. In the 1650s the English physician Richard Lower was among the first to successfully transfuse blood between dogs. Descriptions of such transfusions were published in *Philosophical Transactions* of England's Royal Society, exciting much interest in what such transfusions might do for humans. In one account, "an old mongrel curr, all over-run with the mainge" was "perfectly cured" by the blood of a young spaniel. The same success followed another experiment, in which a "Mr. Gayant transfused the blood of a young dog into the veins of an old, which two hours after, did leap and frisk; whereas he was almost blind with age, and could hardly stir before."⁴⁴ It wasn't long before blood transfusions were tried out on human beings, but without any knowledge of the importance of blood types, it was only a matter of time before someone died,

pleasure or pain, longing or horror? . . . The expression of wonder stands for all that cannot be understood, that can scarcely be believed. It calls attention to the problem of credibility and at the same time insists upon the undeniability, the exigency of experience" (*Marvelous Possessions*, 14, 20). The classic account of the conflict between the so-called "Ancients" and "Moderns" is Richard F. Jones' *Ancients and Moderns: a Study of the Rise of the Scientific Movement in Seventeenth-century England* (New York: Dover, 1982 [1961]). For more modern evaluations, see Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) and Richard Nate, *Wissenschaft und Literatur im England der frühen Neuzeit* (Munich: Fink, 2001).

⁴³ Guy Arbellot, "Les routes de France au XVIIIe Siècle," *Annales* (1973): 786-90; idem, *autour des routes de poste: les premières cartes routières de la France XVIIe-XIXe siècles* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1992). On improvements in cooking, see *Les Dons de Comus, ou les délices de la table* (1739) and *La Cuisinière Bourgeoise* (1747), which went through thirty-two editions by 1789. These books are discussed in Allain Girard, "Le triomphe de la cuisinière bourgeoise: livres culinaires, cuisine et société en France, XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* (1977): 497-512.

⁴⁴ John Lowthorpe, ed., *The Philosophical Transactions and Collections to the End of the Year 1700, Abridg'd and Dispos'd under General Heads*. 2nd ed. (London, 1716), 3: 225-35. Iain Pears's evocative novel, *An Instance of the Finger Post* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), gives a fascinating account of Lower's work on transfusion in the context of seventeenth-century London intellectual life.

which led to a moratorium on further experiments that lasted until the early nineteenth century.

The great hope invested in transfusions may have been extinguished by such disasters, but Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood (on which the possibility of transfusion hinged) was part of a major shift in the way the body was viewed in the early modern period, and this shift fostered the optimistic idea that old age could be a productive and healthy time of life. Harvey was not the first person to have dissected a heart. The second century physician Galen had done the same thing. But Harvey lived in an age of air and water pumps and consequently had at his finger tips a mechanical model that he could apply to the functioning of the human body. The ability to utilize this mechanical model had breathtaking implications, for it meant that not only could the body, like every other machine, be understood and investigated but it could be "fixed" and even remodeled and improved when problems arose.⁴⁵ Instead of being the corruptible locus of sin, sex, and putrefaction, the body was now viewed as a machine. Machines are not by nature disgusting; machines are not associated with drooling, defecating, farting, burping, incontinence, and uncontrollable libidinous urges. They run according to a predetermined plan; and while they may become old and cease to function properly, there is always the hope that they can be patched up or new parts substituted for worn ones. The fear and loathing of the body characteristic of so much classical and Christian thought diminished in the climate of this new mechanical philosophy, and a new pride in the body arose. Robert Boyle, for example, thought it was dishonorable for "a Reasonable Soul to live in so Divinely built a Mansion, as the Body she resides in, altogether unacquainted with the exquisite structure of it."⁴⁶ Thomas Willis, the English physician, recognized that Harvey's discovery required a complete rethinking of human and animal physiology. He put the word "neurologie" on the scientific map in such books as *Cerebri Anatome* (1664) and *Pathologiae Cerebri et Nervosi Generis Specimen* (1667), in which, among other things, he proposed that epilepsy and other convulsive disorders had neurological, not supernatural, origins.⁴⁷ As Roy Porter says in his entertaining, hugely informative, and unfortunately last book *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, "by the close of the seventeenth century, advances in anatomy and physiology had created the promise of a scientific understanding of the body, matching what high-prestige mathematical astrophysics and mechanics had done for the inanimate world."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Descartes employed mechanical models and analogies with clocks and automata in describing the human body in his *Tractatus de Formatione Foetus* (1662), *La Description du corps humain* (1648), and *Traité de l'homme* (1648).

⁴⁶ Cited in Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 228.

⁴⁷ Owsei Temkin, *The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginning of Modern Neurology*. 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971).

⁴⁸ Porter, *Flesh in an Age of Reason*, 54.

The medical materialism that was such a feature of the burgeoning mechanical philosophy of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries accepted another metaphor from the economic theories of the period that emphasized the importance of circulating goods for a national economy. Like the economy, the body depended on the circulation of what went in and what came out, with due care taken between these two events. Obviously this had been a major concern of medicine, particularly Galenic medicine, from time immemorial, but the early modern period exhibited a proliferation of medical advice books, dealing with the so-called "non-naturals," or those items necessary for healthy living, such as: air, food, sleep, exercise, evacuations, and control of the passions. While there was still a moral component involved in insuring one's own health, the connection between disease and sin was gradually abandoned, even by clergymen. Both Protestant and Catholic clergy became active in promoting health. In England, the Anglican clergy were instrumental in founding hospitals and promoting smallpox inoculation. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, wrote one of the most popular self-help medical manuals of the period, *Primitive Physick* (1747). The Anglican clergyman Charles Kingsley claimed that there was "something impious" in the "neglect of personal health." These ideas led to the emergence of a new kind of "muscular" Christianity that identified as its own the classical motto *mens sana in corpore sano*, eventually leading to the founding of such institutions as the Boy Scouts (1907).⁴⁹

One of the most revolutionary and often ignored developments in the early modern period was the increasing interest in statistics and statistical studies of human life. The field of what came to be called "Political Arithmetic" began with the collection of statistics on births and deaths collected by William Petty (1623-1687) and John Graunt (1620-1674) in connection with outbreaks of plague in late seventeenth-century England. Governments had always needed statistics for purposes of taxation and conscription, but Graunt and Petty were the first to argue that statistics were important for knowing such things as the number of doctors, lawyers, and clergy available in different areas and the number of rich and poor in different communities, all of which they claimed was vital for ensuring "good, certain and easie Government."⁵⁰ In France, Colbert established nation-wide statistical questionnaires addressed to local government officials. Parish priests were encouraged to keep better records of birth, marriages, deaths, and burials, with an eye to establishing whether the population of France was increasing or decreasing. In 1664 Vauban published anonymously his famous fifteen-page pamphlet on the methodology of census-taking.⁵¹ Interest in demographics was spurred on by the development of various forms of insurance and the practice of

⁴⁹ Donald E. Hall, ed., *Muscular Christianity. Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁵⁰ Peter Buck, "Seventeenth-century Political Arithmetic; Civil Strife and Vital Statistics," *Isis* 86 (1977): 70-83.

⁵¹ McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment*, 96-7.

governments selling annuities to raise revenues. McManners describes the increasing interest of both the French government and its citizens in statistics, and he claims that during the eighteenth century the government began to collect statistics in order to support medical research: "From preoccupation with taxation, conscription, food supply, and plague control, government was moving towards the support of medical research."⁵² These claims are supported by Andrea Rusnock, who argues that the eighteenth century was a pivotal period in establishing the value of quantitative approaches to complex questions involving public health. Rustock highlights the importance of the emerging field of medical meteorology, which traced the effects of weather, the changing season, and local environments on human mortality.⁵³ The burgeoning field of medical statistics generated notions of probability, which, in turn, helped demystify disease and remove it from the realm of what was considered supernatural and therefore divinely ordained and inevitable.⁵⁴

The interest in medical research and improving the health of the general population was part of what Peter Gay has described as the "medicalization" of the Enlightenment by those authors who discussed the shortcomings of the ancient régime—its religious fanaticism, political injustice, and the prevalence of popular superstition—as "pathologies" that could be "cured."⁵⁵ Even more optimistic were those who believed that it was possible to improve human reason and perfect human nature. In his "Second discourse, sur les progrès successifs de l'esprit humain" (1750), Turgot sketched out the history of human progress.⁵⁶ In 1757 Claude Adrien Helvetius published *De l'esprit*, in which he asked the question, "whether genius [l'esprit] ought to be considered as a natural gift, or as an effect of education," answering that education was all important and consequently perfectibility possible.⁵⁷ Condorcet remained committed to his belief in the inevitable improvement of the human race even after he had been imprisoned during the the French Revolution, eventually committing suicide to avoid the guillotine.⁵⁸ The French physicians Antoine Le Camus and Charles Augustin

⁵² *Ibid.*, 97.

⁵³ Andrea A. Rusnock, *Quantifying Health and Population in Eighteenth-Century England and France*. Cambridge Studies in the History of Medicine, ed. Charles Rosenberg and Colin Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵⁴ On the development and importance of theories of probability, see Barbara Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-century England: A Study of the Relationships between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983); Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability. A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

⁵⁵ Peter Gay, "The Enlightenment as Medicine and as Cure," in *The Age of Enlightenment: Studies Presented to Theodore Besterman*, ed. William H. Barbour (Edinburgh: St. Andrews University Publications, 1967), 375-86.

⁵⁶ *Oeuvres de Turgot*, ed. Eugène Daire and Hippolyte Dussard, 2 vols. (Paris, 1844), 2: 597-611.

⁵⁷ Claude Adrien Helvetius, *De l'esprit, or Essays on the Mind and Its Several Faculties*, transl. William Mudford (London, 1807), xlii.

⁵⁸ Michel Baridon, "Les concepts de nature humaine et de perfectibilité dans l'historiographie des

Vandermonde, both members of the medical faculty at the University of Paris, subscribed to eugenicist schemes for improving the human race. In *La Médecine de l'esprit* (first edition 1753; definitive edition 1769), Le Camus took his lead from Locke, emphasizing the physical foundation of the operation of the mind. He advocated a regime to improve the organs predicated on an easily digestible diet, the sparing consumption of wine, chocolate, coffee, and tea, moderate exercise, and "neither too sparing nor too extravagant" ejaculations. He claimed that these measures were guaranteed to "make us better and more intelligent." As he says, "We claim, through purely mechanical means to make any man a superior thinker, or, to put it differently, to provide his soul with all the solidness and brilliance he wishes."⁵⁹ In his *Essai sur la manière de perfectionner l'espèce humaine* (1756) Vandermonde outlined the simple rules and natural principles that would make health, beauty, and strength hereditary, while simultaneously instructing parents how to train their children's minds. Like Le Camus, he considered the body a machine that could be programmed to function better and more efficiently: "We must reshape our organs, and change, fortify, and improve all the mainsprings of our machine."⁶⁰

The idea of improving human nature went hand in hand with schemes to regenerate and prolong human life.⁶¹ The belief that plants could be regenerated from their ashes when combined with Bonnet's discovery of parthenogenesis in lice and Trembly's discovery that when cut in two a water polyp regenerates into two distinct organisms encouraged the hope that, after all, death might not be the inevitable fate of human beings.⁶² As a student of René Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur exclaimed: "a miserable insect has just shown itself to the world and has changed what up to now we have believed to be the immutable order of nature.

Lumières de Fontenelle à Condorcet," In *L'Histoire au dix-huitième siècle*. Actes du Colloque d'Aix-en-Provence (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 1980), 353-74.

⁵⁹ Cited in Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and Pathology: Sensibility in the Literature and Medicine of Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 85-86.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁶¹ For all the faith in progress, there were grave doubts—especially on the part of conservatives—that human beings could be improved or that prolonging life was desirable. Swift's hideous portrait of the Strulbrugs in *Gulliver's Travels* emphasized the horrors of old age in the absence of eternal youth. It has been suggested that Swift based his description on a study of the *Royal Society* of "Antient Men who have lived too long." See Marjorie Hope Nicolson and Norah M. Mohler, *Science and the Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956), 115-16. As George Rousseau and Roy Porter have said, for all its optimism, there was a deep strand of pessimism in the Enlightenment: "An ominous cloud hovered over the Enlightenment: the fear that, for all their faith in humanity, all their secular evangelizing, all their optimistic demythologizing crusades, the human animal might not prove fit for the programs of education, organization, and consciousness-raising the *philosophes* were mobilizing." See their "Introduction: Toward a Natural History of Mind and Body," *The Languages of Psyche: Mind and Body in Enlightenment Thought*, ed. G.S. Rousseau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 39-40.

⁶² François Secret, "Palingenesis, Alchemy and Metempsychosis in Renaissance Medicine," *Ambix* 26 (1979): 81-99; Virginia P. Dawson, *Nature's Enigma: The Problem of the Polyp in the Letters of Bonnet, Trembly and Réaumur* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1987).

The philosophers have been frightened, a poet told us that death itself has grown pale.”⁶³ Prolonging life was consequently a definite possibility and one fostered by the very real improvements that were made in various areas of medical practice in the early modern period.⁶⁴

While there was admittedly no clear breakthrough in the medical theory, there were improvements in the care of mothers, infants, and the handicapped, as well as advances in surgery. For example, the invention of forceps by the Chamberlen family of physicians in England and their increasing use across the continent led to better and more sophisticated birthing techniques.⁶⁵ In France the famous Mme Du Coudray traveled with her anatomical doll and is said to have trained over five thousand midwives. Jean-André Vernel (1740-1791), a Swiss doctor, set up a school of midwifery in 1778 in Bern, where he offered courses in female anatomy to female midwives, using mannequins and models of the uterus. Vernel argued that because the health of mothers was vital to the health of their children, physical activity and education were as important for girls as for boys.⁶⁶

Significant strides were made in helping the handicapped as well. In 1784 Abbé l'Épée wrote an account of the school where he taught sign language to the deaf. Valentin Haüy described his method to teach the blind to read with raised characters. For the first time these pupils were treated as ordinary children, not invalids.⁶⁷ In addition to these progressive measures, there were significant advances in the practice of surgery. New surgical instruments were developed that led to improvements in dentistry, eye operations, and dealing with broken bones and fractures. Nicolas Le Cat (1700-68) of the Hôtel Dieu in Rouen invented an instrument to grip stones in the bladder and remove them. Experiments done on corpses led to the invention of improved instruments with retractable blades and arms to work inside the bladder. However, in the absence of anesthetics, performing these operations on living patients was another matter. The pain was excruciating and the lack of antiseptics made even a successful operation often fatal, although some patients were willing to take the risk. While these

⁶³ Cited in *ibid.*, 185-86.

⁶⁴ All kinds of “prophets of longevity,” to quote Marie Mulvey Roberts, offered advice about how to live and long and happy life. She describes one of the more colorful and egregious ones, James Graham, in her essay, “‘A physis against death’: eternal life and the Enlightenment—Gender and Gerontology,” *Literature & Medicine during the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Marie Mulvey Roberts and Roy Porter. The Wellcome Institute Series in the History of Medicine, ed. W. F. Bynum and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 151-67.

⁶⁵ Adrian Wilson, *The Making of Man-Midwifery: Childbirth in England, 1660-1770* (London: UCL Press, 1996); Wendy Perkins, *Midwifery and Medicine in Early Modern France* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996).

⁶⁶ Jean-André Vernel, *Essai sur la santé et l'éducation médicale des filles destinées au mariage* (Yverdon, 1776). On Vernel, see Antoinette Emch-Deriaz, “Health and Gender Oriented Education: an Eighteenth-Century Study,” *Women's Studies* 24 (1995): 521-31.

⁶⁷ McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment*, ch. 2. Dora B. Weiner, “Les Handicapés et la Révolution française, aspects de médecine sociale,” *Clio medica* 12 (1977): 97-109; eadem, *The Citizen-Patient in Revolutionary and Imperial Paris* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

developments contributed to the growing faith in medical progress, nothing fostered this faith so much as the success of small pox inoculation.⁶⁸ Small pox was a dreaded disease. According to d'Alembert it affected as many as eight out of ten, killing one out of seven of those afflicted.⁶⁹ The scarring associated with the disease figured in the plot lines of novels and dramas of the period. In *Les Liasons dangereuses* the worst thing one could wish on one's enemy was to get small pox and recover with "un visage à faire tremblé." In Prévost's *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de Malte*, the hero returns to find his love, Helena, completely disfigured by the disease; he can only make love to her in the dark.⁷⁰ Inoculation was one of the great medical success stories of the eighteenth century and did much to encourage the belief in medical progress. Abbé Roman chose this as the subject of his celebratory poem, "L'Inoculation, Poème en quatre chants." A new hairstyle was even devised for women to commemorate the discovery, "coiffure à l'inoculation," which consisted of an olive tree with a serpent entwined about its trunk—symbols of wisdom and Aesclepius—with the sun, signifying enlightenment, rising in the background.⁷¹ Describing the psychological effects of these advances, particularly those in surgery, McManners concludes that "Among educated people there was an increased concern with problems of health, a growing reluctance to accept illness fatalistically, and an intensified shrinking in the face of pain."⁷² Medical developments may not have been instrumental "so much in prolonging life, as in making longer life worth while."⁷³

The conviction that medicine was improving to such a point that all people and especially the elderly could expect to live longer and healthier lives contributed to the greatly enhanced status of the medical profession in the eighteenth century. Surgeons were the most upwardly mobile occupation of the century. For the first time surgery was recognized as a liberal profession, and professorships in surgery opened up at universities. In 1731 the *Académie Royale de Chirurgie* was founded, and its members dared for the first time to claim equality with physicians. La Mettrie, who was both a *philosophe* and a physician, claimed that "Doctors are the only philosophers who are useful to the Republic . . . The others are idlers and

⁶⁸ Lindemann claims small pox inoculation made little headway in the German area of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel because it was considered so dangerous; vaccination fared better.

⁶⁹ "Réflexions philosophiques et mathématiques sur l'application du calcul des probabilités à l'inoculation de la petite vérole," in *Mélanges de littérature, d'histoire et de philosophie* (Amsterdam, 1767). Cited in McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment*, 6.

⁷⁰ These examples are given in *ibid.*

⁷¹ Marie Antoinette inaugurated these extravagant hairstyles or "poufs," which could be up to a yard high and illustrated sentimental or political themes. They were formed from a wire padded with wool, cloth, horsehair, and gauze, interwoven with the woman's own hair. The elaborate construction was stiffened with pomade and dusted with powder which attracted vermin, requiring fashionable ladies to carry long handled head-scratchers. Marie Antoinette wore a "pouf à l'inoculation" to publicize the fact that she had persuaded the King to be inoculated against smallpox.

⁷² McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment*, 47.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 42.

drones.”⁷⁴ The growing confidence in medical progress that accompanied the enhanced reputation of medical practitioners accounts of the increasing popularity of therapeutic baths and bathing establishments as well as for the fear that developed of being buried alive. The publication in 1740 of a *Dissertation sur l'incertitude des signes de la mort* caused great alarm, as did the *Mémoire sur l'abus de l'ensevelissement des morts, par M. Durande, précédé par des réflexions sur le danger des inhumations précipitées* (1789). Peter Reill describes the special precautions taken against burying people prematurely as well as the devices attached to coffins to ensure that if by chance a mistake was made, those buried alive could make their terrible plight known.⁷⁵

All this is not to deny that the medical profession in all its varieties—from physicians and surgeons to quacks and mountebanks—unleashed the hostility and ridicule of many people at the time, as it still does today. As a profession that can kill or cure, medicine has always been reflected in the eyes of those who have suffered or profited from it.⁷⁶ On balance, however, medicine and science in general became increasingly popular in the early modern period because both ignited visions of people living healthier and longer lives.

A number of scholars have discussed what they describe as the “domestication” of science during the eighteenth century as air pumps, barometers, and electrical machines were brought into households for experiments and even incorporated in fine furniture.⁷⁷ So great was the interest in new scientific devices that instrument makers increasingly catered to an amateur and domestic market.⁷⁸ A thriving trade in scientific books emerged as authors with an eye to the market began writing for ordinary people, expressing scientific concepts in familiar,

⁷⁴ *La politique du médecin de Machiavel ou le chemin de la fortune ouvert aux médecines* (Amsterdam, 1746, xx). La Mettrie wrote this under the pseudonym Dr. Fum-Ho-Han. Cited in McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment*, 50.

⁷⁵ Peter H. Reill, “Death, Dying and Resurrection in late Enlightenment Science and Culture,” *Wissenschaft als kulturelle Praxis, 1750-1900*, eds. Hans Erich Bödeker, Peter Hans Reill und Jürgen Schlumbohm (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 255-274.

⁷⁶ For a negative view of medicine, see Fiona Haslam, *From Hogarth to Rowlandson: Medicine in Art in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996).

⁷⁷ The importance of private citizens and especially of women in domesticating science is emphasized by Margaret Jacob and Dorothee Sturkenboom in their article on the Women’s Society for Natural Knowledge (Naturkundig Genootschap der Dames), founded in the Dutch town of Middelburg in 1785 which met regularly until 1881. The authors contend that more attention should be paid to the scientific activities of women at home rather than to the societies and academies that excluded them. On the basis of their research, they claim that in terms of the distribution and absorption of scientific knowledge, the women of Middelburg were at the center of a major intellectual transformation. They were involved in the “domestication of science,” a vital process embedding science in western culture. In this truly revisionist history, women play a central role in the dissemination of the very institution that defines the modern western world (Margaret Jacob and Dorothee Sturkenboom, “A Woman’s Scientific Society in the West: The Late Eighteenth-Century Assimilation of Science,” *Isis* 94 [2003]: 217-52).

⁷⁸ Jim Bennett, “Instruments and Illustrations in Eighteenth-Century Astronomy,” *Science and the Visual Image in the Enlightenment*, ed. William R. Shea (Science History Publications/USA, 2000), 137-54.

accessible language.⁷⁹ John Heilbron attributes the vogue for chubby little boys, or *putti*, in scientific illustrations to this desire to domesticate science and make it appear both innocent and licit. He offers a marvelous selection of images showing *putti* performing various experiments, including one in which they use an air pump to suffocate a small animal, unfortunately a popular practice at the time. An authority of *putti* in baroque art suggests that this was done to make such experiments more palatable: "Deploying large numbers of 'tender' infants in a work of art [was] . . . designed to soften the heart of the viewer and to move him or her irresistibly to sympathy with the particular argument being made."⁸⁰ The popularity of scientific books was so great that Buffon's forty-four volume *Histoire naturelle* was reprinted several times during the century. Scientific illustrations, especially zoological and botanical prints, were immensely popular consumer items. Buffon's plates were so popular that they were published in volume six of the *Encyclopédie* (1768).⁸¹ In addition to the domestic consumption of scientific instruments and books on scientific subjects, particularly medicine, there was great interest in the performance of scientific experiments at the increasing number of observatories, museums, and botanical gardens.⁸²

The medical advances described above, together with the flourishing popular interest in science, contributed greatly to the reevaluation of old age that took place in the early modern period. In his book *L'Homme* Helvetius had claimed that at a certain age women give up rouge and pleasure and turn instead to piety. Diderot took issue with this statement. Relying on his own experience, he claimed that such retirement was a thing of the past:

They stay in society, they are indulgent to the amusements of the young, they play cards and converse (and talk well because they have experience to draw on); they go to the country, on promenades, to the theater—and they rarely indulge in malicious gossip. Their principal concern is for their health, and they are fastidious about all the little comforts of life.⁸³

⁷⁹ Popular works like Fontenelle's *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686), which explained Newtonian science in a dialogue with a female interlocutor, found numerous imitators in such works as Francesco Algarotti's *Il Newtonianismo per le dame* (1739); Benjamin Martin's *The Young Gentleman and Lady's Philosophy* (1772); James Ferguson's *An Easy Introduction to Astronomy for Gentlemen and Ladies* (1779); and Benjamin Franklin's correspondence about scientific matters with Polly Stevenson, the daughter of his London landlady.

⁸⁰ John Heilbron, "Domesticating Science in the Eighteenth Century," *Science and the Visual Image in the Enlightenment*, 1-24. The citation appears on page 10.

⁸¹ Lucia Tongiorgi Tomas, "Naturalistic Illustrations and Collections in Tuscany in the Eighteenth Century," in *ibid.*, 111-36.

⁸² Bennett, "Instruments and Illustration in Eighteenth-Century Astronomy," 151; Emma C. Spary, *Utopia's Garden: French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); *The Cultures of Natural History*, ed. Nicholas Jardine, James A. Secord, Emma C. Spary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁸³ Diderot, "Réfutation. . . de l'ouvrage d'Helvetius intitulé 'l'Homme,'" 1773-4; cited in McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment*, 86.

The idea that even if the body weakened as one aged, the mind might improve and gain greater insight became a common assumption.⁸⁴ Buffon encouraged intellectuals like himself to realize that however old they might be, their work would never be done and that they should take each day at a time.⁸⁵ The cynic Chamfort went as far as to say that he had learned most by "sleeping with women over forty and listening to old men of eighty."⁸⁶ The fascination with long life became so great in the period between 1650 and 1800 that George Rousseau claims a "rhetoric of awe" surrounded the topic. As he says, "Methusalehs especially piqued the visual imagination."⁸⁷ There was a vast literature devoted to what were dubbed "Long-Livers." For example, Harcouet de Longeville's *Long Livers: A Curious History of Such Persons of both Sexes who have liv'd several AGES, and grown Young again: With the rare SECRET of Rejuvenency of Arnoldus of Villa Nova, And a great many approv'd and invaluable Rules to prolong Life* (London, 1722; published in French in 1715); Johann Heinrich Cohausen's *Menippus Redivivus: or, the Sage's Triumph over Old Age and the Grave, wherein a method is laid down for prolonging the life and vigour of Man* (London, 1744); and Lottin's *Almanach de la Vieillesse, ou notice de tous ceux qui ont vécu cent ans et plus*. Perhaps the most extraordinary of these "long-livers" was Thomas Parr. Said to have been born in the fifteenth century, he died in 1635 at the reputed age of 152. Parr had been discovered living quietly in the country by Thomas Howard, the Second Earl of Arundel. Howard brought him to London to show him off as one of nature's great curiosities, but shortly thereafter he died. William Harvey performed the post-mortem and found Parr as healthy as a young man. He concluded that Parr had been done in by the rich food offered at Howard's table. According to Harvey, Parr had been sexually active until the age of 140.⁸⁸ Annibal Camous was another famous "long-liver." Known as "Le Socrate Marseillais," he reportedly died at the age of 121, 3 months, and 13 days, although he was actually a mere 90. His portrait was painted by at least four artists, Claude Joseph Vernet (1714-1789), Louis René Vialy (1680-1770), Michel Honor Bounieu (1740-1814), and Henry d'Arles (1734-1784), which demonstrates the great interest attracted by extreme old age in the eighteenth century.

Fascination with prolonging life went hand in hand with tales of resuscitation and rejuvenation, which were extremely popular in the eighteenth century. In an essay published in 1708, Dr. Begons of the Faculty of Medicine at Montpellier reported that a 104 year old woman had resumed menstruation after a fifty year hiatus. This allowed her to regain her strength, run her household, and eat food she had previously been unable to digest.⁸⁹ Eighteenth-century scientists

⁸⁴ *Encyclopédie*, xvii, 1765, 267; cited in McManners, 86.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Rousseau, "Towards a Geriatric Enlightenment," 4.

⁸⁸ Rousseau, "Towards a Geriatric Enlightenment," 24. Cf. John Taylor, *The Old, Old, Very Old Man; or, the Aged and long Life of Thomas Par* (London, 1635). William Harvey, "The Anatomical Examination of the Body of Thomas Par," *The Works of William Harvey, M.D.* (London, 1858), 587-92.

⁸⁹ *Dissertation physique sur les changements et mouvements critique survenues à quelques personnes âgées qui*

discovered the phenomenon of "Anabiosis," in which a seemingly dead organism was revived. The phenomenon was first described by Leeuwenhoek in 1702 in connection with certain microbes (dried rotifers). In 1766 John Hunter experimented with carp, freezing them and then trying to revive them. He was an early exponent of what has come to be called cryogenics. Benjamin Franklin was intrigued by a report of flies that had "drowned" in wine but were revived by the rays of the sun. This brought him to speculate on what this might mean for human beings in future ages. In a letter to Dr. Jacques Barbeu-Dubourg he makes a humorous reference to his own possible revival after drowning in a cask of Madeira. As he wrote:

I wish it were possible . . . to invent a method of embalming drowned persons, in such a manner that they may be recalled to life at any period, however distant; for having a very ardent desire to see and observe the state of America a hundred years hence, I should prefer to any ordinary death, the being immersed in a cask of Madeira wine, with a few friends, till that time, to be then recalled to life by the solar warmth of my dear country. But since in all probability we live in an age too early and too near the infancy of science, to hope to see an art brought in our time to that perfection, I must for the present content myself with the treat, which you are so kind as to promise me, of the resurrection of a fowl or a turkey cock.⁹⁰

Franklin was optimistic about what medicine might do for people in future generations, which makes his own terrible suffering from gout and kidney stones in the last years of his life all the more poignant. As he wrote to Joseph Priestley in 1780:

The rapid progress *true* science now makes, occasions my regretting sometimes that I was born so soon. It is impossible to imagine the height to which may be carried, in a thousand years, the power of man over matter. We may perhaps learn to deprive large masses of their gravity, and give them absolute levity, for the sake of easy transport. Agriculture may diminish its labor and double its produce; all diseases may by sure means be prevented or cured, not excepting even that of old age, and our lives lengthened at pleasure even beyond the antediluvian standard.⁹¹

From all these examples, it is clear that there was a considerable amount of literature devoted to the subject of old age and the prolongation of life in the early modern period. This has led Rousseau to suggest that when it came to old age, wonders and marvels had not been discredited as Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park claim they were.⁹² People were clearly prepared to swallow the most extravagant tales about supposed "long-livers," even though, as many scholars have pointed out, a serene, healthy, and happy old age was in actuality a rarity.

one semblé *rajeûner*. Cited in Troyansky, *Old Age in the Old Regime*, 112.

⁹⁰ William Pepper, *The Medical Side of Benjamin Franklin* (Philadelphia, 1911), 61-3. Cited in Gruman, "A History of Ideas about the Prolongation of Life," 84.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹² Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998).

Thus, although Rousseau has argued for the existence of a "Geriatric Enlightenment," in which old age was viewed with sympathy and respect, the generally dismal life endured by most old people prompts him to suggest that, and I quote, "it would indeed be informative to have a companion study of the 'suicidal Enlightenments' among the long-livers."

He admits that for most people old age "amounted to a dreary existence," but nevertheless ends his article on an optimistic note. As he says, "the sense that old age could be as blissful a time of life as youth. . . remains liberating."⁹³ What this suggests is that when it came to old age, the hope inspired by medical advances of the early modern period trumped actual reality. Most elderly people were neither healthy nor happy, but this did not stop people from imagining a time in which the elderly would be both. In a significant way this parallels the change in attitude accompanying the seventeenth-century scientific revolution. In the first half of the seventeenth century many intellectuals were consumed by the idea that the world was in a state of irreparable decay. The existence of irregular mountain ranges was taken, for example, as a sign of the earth's degeneration from its originally perfect spherical shape.⁹⁴ Yet by the end of the century this ingrained pessimism had given way to an almost fatuous optimism and belief in progress. This astonishing transformation was in part due to the kind of scientific and philosophical developments associated with Descartes, Newton, and other great figures of the age. Physical reality had not changed that much—medicine still killed more people than it cured, and there was no real protection against warfare, plagues, famines, fires, and natural disasters—but the mental landscape had changed dramatically. The idea of progress was in the air and with it came the hope that human life would become happier, healthier, and longer.

So, what in conclusion can be said about old age in the early modern period? The early modern period, and particularly the seventeenth century, was a great age of transformation, to borrow Polyani's phrase.⁹⁵ The Reformation wars of religion destabilized religious and political institutions and encouraged skepticism. Religious conflict stimulated new ideas about life and death and man's relationship with God. Protestants, especially Calvinists, emphasized man's life or "calling" in this world, and by eliminating Purgatory severed the close ties that had previously existed between the living and the dead. The divine right of kings was replaced by more modern and limited forms of government, and more modern economic systems emerged with the development of proto-capitalism.

⁹³ Rousseau, "Towards a Geriatric Enlightenment," 35.

⁹⁴ Victor Harris, *All Coherence Gone* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); Harry Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), ch. 6. Marjorie H. Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: the development of aesthetics about the infinite* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959).

⁹⁵ Karl Polyani, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1944).

There was a radical re-visioning of the universe as the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic worldview was replaced by the Copernican-Newtonian synthesis. Given all these changes, it is understandable that profound changes occurred in the way humans viewed themselves. There was a growing emphasis on the individual and a desire for personal autonomy that called into question the prevailing patriarchal ideal with its hierarchical view of social and familial relationships. Science and secularization fostered a sense of optimism and faith in human potential as the Protestant emphasis on man's irredeemably fallen nature gave way to the idea that human beings were in charge of their own destiny as well as the world's. During the seventeenth century there was a major shift in people's orientation. Instead of looking back to an age of prelapsarian perfection or forward to a supernatural afterlife, people began to concentrate on this world, looking ahead to an earthly future of continual progress. These developments became more pronounced in the eighteenth century, but they were in place by the time Christian August celebrated his jubilee. In fact, Christian August's court was a mecca for attracting the kind of progressive religious, philosophical, and scientific ideas that are more commonly associated with the Enlightenment.⁹⁶ It is no coincidence that Sulzbach was both a place of social experimentation, where Jews and Christians lived together with an unprecedented degree of equality and toleration, as well as a place where science was pursued, especially in the areas of medicine and chemistry. Christian August's Chancellor, Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1636–1689), was an active participant in the scientific debates of the period. He corresponded with members of England's *Royal Society* and was a member of the *Académie Royale des Sciences* in Paris. Von Rosenroth's nephew claims that he had mastered all the major alchemical works, and that the medicines he prepared were so effective they brought people back from the dead.⁹⁷ Another friend and close advisor of Christian August, Francis Mercury van Helmont (1614–1698), was renowned across Europe for his alchemical and medical skills. Van Helmont set up a laboratory in Sulzbach, where he, von Rosenroth, and the Prince worked together compounding medicines, devising new and practical inventions like better cooking pots and a spinning wheel for two hands, and keeping up with the latest developments in chemistry. Improving and prolonging life were a definite part of the Sulzbach agenda. As Erin Campbell points out in her introduction to *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe*, the way old age is viewed and represented in different communities and cultures reflect the social relations within that community and form part of the prevailing ideology supporting the power structure.⁹⁸ Thus when Christian August singled out the elderly citizens of Sulzbach to be especially honored at his Jubilee, he gave public recognition to the fact that an old Prince and

⁹⁶ Allison P. Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century: The Life and Thought for Francis Mercury van Helmont, 1614-1698* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

⁹⁷ Manfred Finke & Erni Handshur, "Christian Knorr von Rosenroths Lebenslauf aus dem Jahre 1718," *Morgen-Glanz: Zeitschrift der Christian Knorr von Rosenroth Gesellschaft* 1 (1991): 33-48.

⁹⁸ *Growing Old in Early Modern Europe: Cultural Representations*, ed. Erin Campbell, introduction, 2.

his old subjects deserved to be on center stage rather than waiting quietly in the wings for a dignified death. I can only conclude by saying that Christian August died at the robust age of 86 with van Helmont not far behind at 84. Von Rosenroth was the odd man out; he died at the relatively young age of 53, but two out of three successes were the kind of odds that anyone would have been happy to accept. By the time of the Prince's death in 1706, eleven years after his Jubilee, people had begun to think that old age was something that could be medically managed and death postponed, if not forever, at least for a very long time.

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5. Assuerus van Londerseel after Nicolaes de Bruyn, *Eighty-Year-Old-Man*, c. 1600, engraving, 27,2 x 20,6 cm, Hollstein 207, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (Anouk Janssen's essay)
6. Assuerus van Londerseel after Nicolaes de Bruyn, *Ninety-Year-Old-Man*, c. 1600, engraving, 27,2 x 20,6 cm, Hollstein 208, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (Anouk Janssen's essay)
7. Anonymous, *Ere Vatter und Mutter* (Honour Father and Mother), woodcut, 12 x 8,5 cm, from: Sebastian Brant, *Narrensch[h]iff* (Basel, 1506), ch. 89, Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel, ref. no. A:293.5 Quod. (1) (Anouk Janssen's essay)
8. Anonymous after Adriaen van de Venne, *Poor Parents, Rich Children*, engraving, 4,9 x 6,7 cm, from: Jacob Cats, *Houwelyck: Dat is de Gantsche Geleghentheydt des Echten Staets* (Den Haag: Adriaen van de Venne, 1628), 837, Hollstein 228, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Den Haag, ref. no. 2212 B 7 (Anouk Janssen's essay)
9. Adriaen Collaert after Maarten de Vos, *Jupiter/Old Age*, 1581, engraving, 30,3 x 21,1 cm, Hollstein 1371, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (Anouk Janssen's essay)

10. Adriaen Collaert after Maarten de Vos, *Saturnus/Very Old Age*, 1581, engraving, 30,6 x 20,5 cm, Hollstein 1372, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (Anouk Janssen's essay)

11. Hieronymus Wierix after Hans Vredeman de Vries, *Doric Order / 48-64 years*, 1577, engraving, 21 x 27,2 cm, Hollstein 439, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (Anouk Janssen's essay)

12. Hieronymus Wierix after Hans Vredeman de Vries, *Tuscan Order / 64-80 years*, 1577, engraving, 21,1 x 27,4 cm, Hollstein 440, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (Anouk Janssen's essay)

13. Anonymous after Adriaen van de Venne, *Het Houw'licks Bed zy onbesmet* (The Marriage Bed be Unbesmirched), from: Johan de Brune, *Emblemata of Zinne-werck* (Amsterdam: Jan Evertsen Kloppenburch, 1624) no. 2, Hollstein 24, Library Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, ref. no. XH.00002 (Anouk Janssen's essay)

14. Rembrandt, *Saint Jerome in his Study*, 1642, etching, 15,1 x 17,3 cm, Hollstein B105, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (Anouk Janssen's essay)

15. Daniël van den Brenden after Adriaen van de Venne, *Old Woman with Glasses and a Book*, c. 1625-1635, engraving, 19,2 x 15 cm, Hollstein 8, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (Anouk Janssen's essay)

16. Anonymous, *Quaere Adolescens, utere Senex* (Acquire in Youth, Enjoy in Old Age), woodcut 6,3 x 6,3 cm, from: Hadrianus Junius, *Emblemata* (Antwerp: Christoffel Plantijn, 1565), no. 35, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Den Haag, ref. no. 1704 B 3 (Anouk Janssen's essay)

17. Anonymous after Otto van Veen, *Varia Senectae Bona* (The Good Sides to Old Age are Manifold), engraving, 18 x 15 cm, from: *Quinti Horati Flacci Emblemata* (Antwerpen: Hieronymus Verdussen, 1607), 163, Hollstein 154, Library Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, ref. no. XH.00048 (Anouk Janssen's essay)

18. Anonymous, *Von alten Narren* (The Old Fool), woodcut, 12 x 8,5 cm, from: Sebastian Brant, *Narrenschiff* (Basel, 1506), ch. 5, Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel, ref. no A:293.5 Quod. (1) (Anouk Janssen's essay)

19. Jan Saenredam after Hendrick Goltzius, *Unequal Lovers*, 1600, engraving, 20,9 x 27,3 cm, Hollstein 329, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (Anouk Janssen's essay)

20. Cornelis Bloemaert after Abraham Bloemaert, *Avaritia*, ca. 1625, etching and engraving, 19,5 x 14,4 cm, Hollstein 286, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (Anouk Janssen's essay)
21. Crispijn de Passe I, *Ages of Man*, Hollstein 484, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (Martha Peacock's essay).
22. Claes Jansz, *Clock, Hoorndrager*, Hollstein 19, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (Martha Peacock's essay).
23. Philip Koninck, *Hoorndrager Pendant*, Collection Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RDK), The Hague (Martha Peacock's essay).
24. Philip Koninck, *Hoorndrager Pendant*, Collection Rijksbureau voor Kunsthistorische Documentatie (RDK), The Hague (Martha Peacock's essay).
25. Harmen Muller, *Hennetaster*, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Hollstein 125 (Martha Peacock's essay).
26. Anonymous, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam (Martha Peacock's essay).
27. Cornelis Bloemaert after Hendrick Bloemaert, *Hennetaster*, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Hollstein 290 (Martha Peacock's essay).
28. Jan Hattigh Baak, *Hennetaster Pendant*, Centraal Museum, Utrecht, Present Location Unknown (Martha Peacock's essay)
29. Jan Hattigh Baak, *Hennetaster Pendant*, Centraal Museum, Utrecht (Martha Peacock's essay).
30. Titian. *Allegory of Prudence*. The National Gallery, London (PL-SER 1 NG6376) (Sophie Bostock's essay)

